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THIRTY TALES

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H. E. BATES

Thirty Tales

With an Introduction by David Garnett



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TO
E. E. KIRBY

INTRODUCTION

My first meeting with H. E. Bates was when I invited him to come over from the valley of the Nen to the valley of the Ouse, and during his visit I asked him to plant a lime tree. Though I was not then aware of it, nothing could have been more appropriate, for Bates is an enthusiastic gardener and has a lucky hand: all his plants grow luxuriantly and flower magnificently. So the lime he planted has flourished and flung out its branches, which in winter are tipped with fat wine-coloured buds that burst out into a light cloak of heart-shaped leaves in spring, while the rich clusters of honey-coloured, honey-scented blossoms follow at the beginning of summer. If the small white petals were broken cappings of wax and the depths of the flowers were cells of honey, the bees could not work in them more eagerly: there is such a buzz round the young lime that a hive seems to be swarming into it.

To my mind, Bates is very like the tree he planted: he writes easily and grows in importance every year, like the young tree that is going to take the place of an old decaying elm, and his stories have the sweet scent and the summer freshness of the lime blossom.

There are all kinds of individual beauty in literature; every writer who is worth anything at all has his own scent, which perfumes his stories and which people mistakenly call his style; though his style may vary according to the nature of his subject the scent remains the same. Thus one writer will smell of the village shop, of groceries, sawdust, soap and blue packets of sugar, another of the stacks of peat drying on a desolate moorland, a third of the crypt, full of caps and coats, in a boys' school.

Nothing is more foolish than to praise one good writer at the expense of another, or a greater waste of time than to try to arrange artists in order of merit. Thus, though I believe that Bates is undervalued by most critics, I shall not try to

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exalt him by depreciating others. I will only say that for me the characteristic odour of his stories is that of lime blossom on a fresh summer's morning, and that I can't think of anything more agreeable, or more delightful.

This collection of his stories has been chosen by himself from his already published work, and it begins with what I consider to be his masterpiece: 'Alexander.' That story appears to me to have a dewy freshness, not only of the subject but of the author's perceptions. It is a memory of childhood—or perhaps I should say that it is constructed out of memories of childhood, and though such reminiscences are the most vivid things in literature 'Alexander' can take its place with the most famous. Undoubtedly the boy in the cart is Bates, and the little pony, swishing its long tail, must have travelled one of the roads I know well, over that bit of country which is as lovely as Bates describes, by Yelden with its romantic Castle Hill to Newton Bromswold or Melchbourne. Somewhere on the edge of those woods you must go to look for the cottage with goats and geese grazing outside it where Annie Fell lived, and farther east, near Pertenhall, or even as far as Kimbolton, you can look for the green lawns, the decaying orchard and garden, where the Old Tit lived alone with her seven bitches and her white cat.

You will find the scene of many of the stories here in that bit of country on the east bank of the Nen, and it was in that river, of course, that the two old men, Will and Matthew, set their lines for eels one summer night. That story 'Fishing' could hardly be shorter and could hardly be slighter, but it is a complete and perfect little work of art, full of humour and containing a profound reflection on human life. Its subject and the music of its last line: 'But along the river-path nobody comes,' give it something of the quality of one of Waley's translations of Po-Chui-I.

I have not asked Bates, but it is more than likely that this was intentional, for it is impossible to read many of his stories

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without being reminded of other writers. Indeed, there is hardly a single story in which there is not a subtle reference to one of his favourite authors: to Tchegov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Conrad, or Stephen Crane. If you have a good ear, you will catch a number of such allusions, for Bates has read a great deal, and never hesitates to adopt and adapt another man's methods for his own purposes. One of the things which strikes me, as a writer, most about Bates is that he seems to know and understand by instinct exactly what other writers are trying to do. This is one of the rarest qualities in an author, who is usually far too occupied by his own attempts to give a moment's attention to other people's efforts. Bates is thus, I believe, more conscious of his intentions, and more aware of what he is doing, than most writers. His one serious fault is that he is not as sensitive to words as he might be: a verbal clumsiness often mars a page which is otherwise æsthetically perfect. But there are signs that he is becoming increasingly sensitive in this direction. His conception of a story is very rarely, perhaps never, at fault.

That is not to say that his work is not unequal. It inevitably must be, for he is prolific of little things, since he has a lucky hand with the pen as well as with the trowel, and everything that he touches comes to something. That is a particularly happy disposition for the writer of short stories, it is, indeed, what makes him one. Tchegov was such a writer; sketches and short tales simply poured from his pen, and when we judge him we think of only his best work. The same standards must be applied to Bates, and you cannot do better, I think, than judge him from this volume of stories. But when you have judged him as a writer of short stories, remember that he has also several novels to his credit. The best of these, in my opinion, is *The Fallow Land*, a novel of an English farm which has an extraordinary solidity. And unlike so many novels about country people the characters are individuals: they are not mere types whose stolid stockish-

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ness masquerades as strength. Not all his novels have this rare quality—for individuals are rare in modern novels—but there are intensely living people also in his novel *Charlotte's Row*. And there is no living English writer of whose future work I feel more confident. It is not that I do not think that Bates may write another bad book or even a very bad book. But I feel that both his best and his worst work are still exercises, as all the works of an artist must be who is developing his powers. I do not anticipate great works of astonishing originality, for, to tell the truth, great originality is not the distinguishing feature of any of Bates's work. His great merit is his astonishing sensibility. His subjects are not new, nor are we shown them in an unfamiliar lighting, which can alter the aspect of ordinary things. What he succeeds in doing is to show them more clearly, more delicately and more tenderly than they have ever been shown before. There have been many painters with such a gift, but very few writers. Thus one can get an emotion from such an extremely simple story as 'Blossoms,' where Francie takes her stupid little son to school on the back of her bicycle, which is very rare in literature, but which is to be found in the work of many painters. There is something about that story in particular which reminds me of Renoir.

This collection, then, will enable many readers to form a better idea of the work of a particularly charming writer, but it will not, I am glad to say, permit them to pass a final judgment. While Bates is alive that will have to undergo continual and, I believe, an ever more favourable revision. There will be more blossoms on the lime next year, and more still the year after.

DAVID GARNETT.

ALEXANDER

I

EARLY one August morning a curious black cart on low springs, drawn by a little shaggy pony with a tail that swept about its legs like a skirt, jogged steadily off from a narrow street bordering the river, climbed in a leisurely manner through the town, and began travelling slowly and almost sleepily eastward towards open country.

In the cart, half concealed by piles of creaking baskets, sat a small, fair-haired boy of eleven or twelve, with drowsy blue eyes; and by his side a fat, sunburnt man with white hair, dressed in breeches and black leggings and a red waistcoat, evidently put on with special care and worn with special pride. All the buttons of this garment resembled fishes' eyes, and a good many cunning pockets were concealed in every part of it, inside and outside, back and front. A silver watch-chain dangled across it, bearing handsome engraved medals won for fishing and shooting. Something about the waistcoat, perhaps the medals themselves, seemed to attract the boy, for he sat very still, his head to one side, gazing at it. Sometimes he looked exactly as if about to drop off to sleep, his head nodding and his eyes shutting with a kind of thankful bliss. At these moments, as if regarding this as the pleasantest, most flattering thing in all the world, the man would turn on him a gaze mild with approbation and beatitude. He crouched as he drove, flapping the reins gently on the pony's back, and from time to time would raise his head and stare across the plain at the countless cornfields and orchards stretching away to an horizon darkened by misty woods lying upon it like sleeping giants.

For a mile or more the cart drove on in this fashion, the boy still half asleep, the man meditative, the pony never changing its pace. The sun rose up, at first like a fluffy yellow ball, then like a disc of polished brass. Trees, cornfields, farms, pastures, horses and workmen among the mown corn all

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appeared instantly bathed in a soft transfiguring light. Objects a great distance off, little towers, smoking chimneys, village spires, became lightly pencilled into the scene. The sun ran swiftly over the plain, pursuing lines of black shadow. A covey of partridges scurried, screamed, then spread out like a black fan and vanished, the barley ears waving briefly and lightly where they came to earth. Slowly the woods resolved themselves; the trees stood in sharp, unbroken line; then the dew became visible in manifold, glittering drops, giving the parched grasses a look of fresh life, hanging upon the trees like ladies' earrings and covering each of the black and crimson berries on the hedgeside like a shell of glass. Soon everywhere was under a warm stillness; all the mist dispersed stealthily and silently, without wind, and the trees seemed to stoop with an invisible burden of heavy airs and the rich loveliness of the ripening year.

As the cart went on, a black shadow began to glide steadily by the horse's side, and a strong fresh scent, with something autumnal about it, began to blow swiftly into the nostrils of the boy, who could feel the sun growing warmer and warmer on his closed lids and on his cheeks and hands.

Presently the man took out his watch and remarked in a soft bass voice: 'Nearly nine.' The boy raised his head and yawned, but did not answer.

Little by little the nature of the country began to change. Gentle hills and a long shallow valley with a white stream appeared. Soon a vast and magnificent view unfolded like a picture.

Being long-sighted, the man would rest his eyes upon remote objects like windmills, water-towers, specks that were cattle or harvesters. All at once his eyes sparkled with eagerness and he began to nudge and pummel the boy into a state of wakefulness and attention. At last he tightened the reins and called excitedly, half standing up among the baskets:

'Alexander! Alexander! Boy, look, look! What is it?

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Can you see? Open your peepers, Alexander, and just look, look, look. What do you make of it?

And the boy, excited also, sat upright.

'Hérons!' the man whispered.

As the boy gazed up the word was repeated several times, more and more excitedly. Two large, beautiful birds appeared overhead, flapping their way with splendour towards the east, silently and impressively, with the sun shining golden upon them at sudden intervals. The cart had come for the first time to a standstill. The little horse stood quietly panting. Nothing else could be heard; only the strange, golden stillness seemed to ring like the dim echo of a bell over everything as they watched the birds, two diminishing shapes becoming swallowed in the depth of blue sky.

After a long interval, during which the boy emerged for the first time into unconfused wakefulness, the man flapped the reins and remarked:

'I used to know a man who stuffed birds, specially herons. If I'd had a gun just now I might have knocked that pair down for him. He was a masterpiece. For all you knew they might as lief have been alive as dead.'

The cart moved forward again. The boy, on whom the herons had made a great impression, suddenly remarked:

'You shouldn't shoot birds, not even sparrows.'

'Sparrows are pests,' said the man. 'That's law, Alexander. You can't get away from the law.'

'God might strike you, all the same,' said the boy.

'God what?' uttered the man, as if astonished or not catching the words. 'God what did you say?'

'It's been known! Ursula told me about a man who had stolen a calf from a widow woman and while he was eating it afterwards, God struck him.'

'How? Struck him?'

'I don't know how. Ursula says——'

'Never mind what Ursula says! The woman's all non-

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sense and popery. Never you mind what she says, the old fool. There's no truth in it.'

The boy did not speak. To all this conversation he had listened gravely, taking everything to heart. Each time he looked at the man, his uncle, he was overcome with reverence and admiration. Nevertheless, there was a warm note of affection between them. Often something serious and mature lurked in Alexander's eyes; and frequently from the other's some child-like and naïve light shone down upon him.

The cart proceeded at the same unvarying pace as before. Now the boy sat upright. The hot morning sun began to burn him. Gradually the sky assumed a richer shade of blue and the grasses began to give off a little vapour. The boy began to take a great interest in what was going on, his mind dwelling on the day ahead—where they were going, what would take place, how much longer they must drive. He tried often to picture the great house to which he understood they were driving, the long avenues of plums and pears, the over-reaching apple trees, the walls bearing peaches, apricots and even quinces in great abundance, and the old, wizened, solitary creature who lived in this house surrounded by many brown-and-black dogs and a white cat which she never allowed out of sight. He pondered for a long time, but without enlightenment, on this strange creature who sold fruit to his uncle—'Because, Mr. Bishop, you knew me when I was a girl and I can trust you not to break the trees and put the wrong measure in the basket for yourself,' and sometimes he pictured the garden with great success, almost smelling the warm ripeness given off by fruits and leaves.

'What time shall we be there?' he looked up and asked.

The man was lighting his pipe and to Alexander it seemed a long time before he answered:

'A little after ten if we don't stop anywhere. Are you hungry? Ursula put some cheese-cakes in the basket in case you were hungry.'

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He was not hungry. In spite of this and though he considered Ursula's cheese-cakes very moderate indeed, he ate two and, while eating, loosened the collar of his shirt. The sun was hot on his face and neck. A little afterwards the road turned abruptly to the left, and from the hot stillness of the open country they passed suddenly into a cool wood of beeches, oaks and firs, to the accompaniment of stirring leaves and branches, a fitful talking of birds, a gentle whispering of a thousand unknown mysterious voices.

'The house sits that way, on the far side of the wood,' said the man, pointing the whip.

Alexander looked into the wood, from which now and then broke strange scuffling noises. He saw nothing but a vast extent of trees with a glimpse of some fungi as large as pancakes and bright orange in colour. All the leaves, twigs, grasses were dripping with dew, setting up everywhere a kind of watery music, as if from a hidden spring. Drops fell from the overhanging branches and plopped on the cart and the baskets and even on his hands.

Something red appeared along the road. Before long it grew large and life-like and resolved into a woman in a red woollen jacket and a black skirt, carrying a basket. His uncle suddenly began whistling and gave the horse a playful flick as if he were very happy.

From that moment, until they drew level with the woman, the man stared hard at the black skirt, and when they came closer brought the little horse to a walk and tried to catch a glimpse of the woman's face, which was turned away from them. Suddenly she started violently at the sound of wheels, and turning sharply, almost dropped her basket.

His uncle ceased whistling. 'I thought so! Annie Fell, my girl!' he shouted at once. 'It is you! Yes, it's you right enough. Thinks I, coming all along the road, that's Annie Fell's walk, it's like her father's. God bless me! You look

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well. Mushrooms! So you got up before you went anywhere this morning. Well, God bless me, God bless me.'

While speaking he slapped one knee in astonishment. Alexander took in the woman's fresh, plump features, her sturdy body and the immense yellow bunch of hair, too heavy to be held up, falling like fine wool about her neck and shoulders.

'Oh! it's Eli. It's so long since we saw you.'

'Yes! Seven or eight years. At Pollyanna's wedding. Ah, how's Pollyanna?'

'Ah, she's poorly. Her legs keep swelling. She ain't good for much.'

'That's no good. A woman needs good legs. . . There was a pause, as if this statement had added to the sum of human knowledge or had a mysterious, subtle meaning. Alexander felt awkward and took his eyes away from the woman and was relieved when his uncle broke the silence again.

'How's your father, my girl?'

She looked up and said in a weary, disillusioned voice, 'He ain't worth a hatful of crabs, either. He's had an operation and every drop and tittle he has Cilla and I have to put down him with a spoon. We have a life with him.'

'So they cut him, did they?'

'There's cuts on him as long as a kidney bean, and a bit longer, I'll swear,' she said.

'That's no good to a man. It's all knifing and butchery with doctors. What do they care? What's the like of me and you to one of them? They want to see what's inside you, and so out comes the knife and you're half-way to Kingdom Come without a chance to say "Our Father." Ah! . . . Are you going home? Give me your basket then, and get up and we'll put you down at the house. No, I don't hold with this butchery.'

He shook his head gravely and vehemently. The woman

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climbed into the cart and sat between the boy and his uncle. Alexander remained silent and reserved. When they drove off he concentrated his attention on the wood, looking for jays, squirrels and mushrooms. But often he glanced at the woman furtively, attracted by something warm about her, and the thought of the unfortunate man with cuts as long as beans on his body would trouble him strangely, until he felt that he would be glad when they were alone once more, only his uncle and himself and the little horse bearing them steadily forward into the unfamiliar, golden country.

He observed with relief, a little later, a break in the woodland and a small stone house with snug, diamond-paned windows, tucked away in the clear space. A number of hens and geese, with a white goat, were bobbing hither and thither like scraps of paper on the surrounding grass, and a warm smell of animals and burning wood reached him. Uncle Bishop brought the cart to a standstill and the woman alighted.

Alexander felt as if he had been pressed in a little box. His body seemed shrunken and he would have been thankful to have driven off without delay. But, looking up, the woman said:

‘You must come in and say half a word to him——’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Eli, gazing at the distance.

‘We’ve a long way to go.’

‘Don’t say you won’t have a glass,’ she went on, as if pleading. ‘You haven’t so far but what it might be a little farther.’

And to Alexander’s disappointment and annoyance his uncle began to alight also. The boy sat still, holding the reins, glaring. His heart sank lower. And in a not very convincing tone he suddenly said:

‘I’ll sit here.’

‘Oh! but the horse can look after itself,’ said the woman.

They both looked at him. ‘Make haste,’ said his uncle.

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'It's Fanny's boy; you know Fanny,' he explained to the woman.

'Fanny's boy! So that's Fanny's boy? Well, well, I knew your mother years ago. You tell her you saw Annie Fell.'

'Ah, that's right, there's something for you to remember.'

So he followed them across the grass, through a wicket-gate and into a garden flanked by trees. A grey sheep-dog lay like a rug across the doorstep, dozing. The door stood open. Uncle Bishop and the woman entered, but Alexander lingered behind, trying to look as if the sheep-dog interested him, though secretly he was afraid of dogs.

'Cilla! Cilla!' the woman began to call upstairs. 'Cilla, here's a visitor. Ah! you couldn't guess in a month of Sundays.'

'Let's go up,' she said.

She removed her hat, and Uncle Bishop began to follow her heavily up some narrow stairs. At their departure the sheep-dog opened his eyes, got lazily to his feet and pattered after them. Alexander began to wonder if he too ought to go, but presently feet resounded overhead and a murmur of voices floated down, and he felt that he had been forgotten.

A little time passed. The sun was hot on his face, and the wooden lintel burned against his hand. Nothing stirred. In the dense sheltered growth of the garden there was not a breath, not a petal or leaf in motion. Bees would appear and spend a little time among some yellow dahlias and then surge away.

Absolute silence seized all things. Alexander began to look for something to occupy his mind, and, turning to the house, he caught sight of a double-barrel sporting gun standing by the wall. The gun was very handsome and fascinating, and though he dare not touch it, he remained gazing at it for a long time, imagining himself taking aim. Presently, tiring of the gun, he looked about the room. It had a low, curious aspect and an appearance of being very old. Some tall

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geraniums, pink and milk in colour, bloomed in the window, their pretty silken petals falling on a lace-cushion, hung with bunches of bobbins, standing beneath. A chain of birds' eggs was looped over a looking-glass, and a blue enamel bowl of small dark plums stood on the floor.

Presently, as he was scrutinising a photograph of some soldiers and wondering if they had ever fought with Zulus, a curious, rhythmical noise, like that of a purring cat, startled him. It seemed to him to issue from a door standing half-open by the stairs.

He tiptoed towards the door, stood for a moment very still, and then poked in his head. He recoiled with great haste immediately, trembling.

In the room an old woman, an incredibly astoundingly old woman, with a face like a dried lemon and scarcely any hairs on her head, sat asleep with her hands locked together in her lap, clasping a yellow comb. Her mouth opened regularly the smallest fraction, and emitted a strange half-whistling, half-purring sound. His startled mind refused to think who she might be, or what she was doing there, but retained only the awful, haunting impression that her closed eyes were staring at him through their bluish lids.

He turned and retreated hurriedly. As he reached the garden something stirred there also and the hot stillness was broken by the noise of footsteps coming. He waited, a little nervously, and then, without any other hint or warning, he found himself face to face with a young girl. He looked at her, but did not move, and again nothing seemed to take place in his mind. Only his eyes did their work, drinking in the impression of her pretty, delicate face, her soft neck and her light hair almost the colour of barley. Each impression smote him sharply, until his breast seemed as if about to burst with its own throbbing. In a strange way, without deliberation, he idealised her at once, thinking that he must be careful how he spoke to her and how he acted before her, and he felt

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acutely conscious of his physical self and was filled with the impression that everything about her, her large profound blue eyes, the yellow pansy tucked in her hair, the little printed flowerets on her dress and also the plums in her basket, were all staring at him, astonished and unflinching.

After a little silence she began to move in his direction. As she came nearer the look of dumb astonishment on her face increased.

Not knowing what to do, Alexander muttered stupidly, 'I'm waiting for someone.'

In rather a soft, drawling voice, and looking first towards the road and then at him, she said slowly in reply:

'Did you come in that cart?'

'Yes, that's our cart,' he said quickly. Then, as if to appear at ease, he added:

'You didn't notice if the horse had moved on, I expect, did you?'

'No, he hadn't moved.'

'That's all right,' he said. 'I only wondered, because he's a bit restless in summer.'

She remained silent, and feeling this silence acutely, he remarked:

'They're nice plums,' not daring to look into her face, but simply gazing at the dark blue fruit instead.

'They fall off and I have to pick them up every morning,' she told him. 'Look at my hands.'

He cast a brief glance at her stained fingers and felt immediately in some way flattered because she had asked him to do so.

'They're eating plums, I suppose,' he remarked.

Suddenly, without answering, she moved past him, and thinking that he had perhaps offended her and that she was about to disappear irrevocably, he called rather timidly after her:

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'I suppose I could have a look at the garden?'

She called back at once:

'Wait a moment, I'll take you down.'

Almost simultaneously with this she reappeared, now with an empty basket.

'Perhaps I'd better make certain about the horse; he won't stand in hot weather,' remarked Alexander.

He satisfied himself by staring over the wicket at the little horse grazing peacefully by the woodside. As he rejoined the girl he tried to walk slowly and naturally, without eagerness and without excitement. Nevertheless, he was conscious of being filled and overcome by a sensation which in its novelty and wonder seemed to deprive him of something with every step he took with the girl deeper into the garden. And in place of what he lost came a host of strange, unbelievable emotions of which hitherto he had suspected nothing, a sense of pleasure which filled his mind like a sweet smell.

It was a long garden, with not many flowers, but a great number of fruit trees set very thick and close, so that they appeared to be strangling each other. White beehives stood here and there in open spaces. Under the trees the same hot, overpowering stillness as ever stifled everything. All the time Alexander longed to make some sensible or amusing remark to the girl, who walked a little ahead of him, bumping the empty basket softly on her knees at each step, but something prevented him, and he became entranced merely by watching her.

He walked behind her as if dreaming. Presently the path turned to the right, and he caught a faint, brackish odour of water and saw a small pond.

The water was shallow and dingy-looking, the surface sprinkled with countless little yellow sloe leaves and the edge fringed with coarse grasses. When the girl ran on, however, and reached the far side, it seemed to Alexander as clear as a mirror, reflecting her white figure with strange purity, and

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he felt an odd desire to jump across the pond in a very romantic fashion and land at her feet.

But suddenly the girl called:

'Can you climb trees?'

How best to answer this he did not know. But after a second he said:

'What trees are there to climb?'

'Only the sloe tree!' she cried.

She ran towards a large sloe bush overhanging the pond. Climbing trees was an accomplishment of Alexander's, but the sloe bush seemed to him dense, prickly and not quite assailable.

'Do you think the sloes are quite ripe?' he remarked in a hesitant voice.

'Don't you want to climb?' the girl flashed out at once.

'Yes, of course.'

'Then shall I climb first or will you?' she asked, while he hesitated.

'Oh, you first, you go,' he said.

She immediately made a light spring and climbed easily and quickly to a fork in the trunk, and, squatting there, gave the tree a sudden violent shake which brought sloes pelting down on the grass, in the pond and on Alexander's head.

'Bite one, bite one!' she called in extreme excitement.

But Alexander only shook his head, and dropping into the grass, broke into a slow, almost diplomatic smile, without a word.

All this gave him confidence and he looked up at her light form. In these moments he forgot his uncle, the little horse and the journey which meant so much to him, and felt that his whole existence was bound up in the girl, who never ceased attracting him. Seeing her suddenly leave the tree and take a bound through the grass to his side overcame him with a strange faintness. When she sat down he tried at once to look as if interested in some object in the pond. His quick

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glance arrested her. She followed his gaze, a silence deepening and falling upon them immediately, a silence he found hard to endure again.

But he could say nothing. He half-closed his eyes against the brilliant sunshine. The thoughts he conceived were unbalanced and spasmodic and he could never work them out. An incredible length of time seemed to pass. . . . At last a pair of pigeons broke from just beyond the sloe bush, and flew over the house. The girl gazed up at them. In a flash, his heart clamouring in his throat, he turned and looked at her face, upturned to the sunshine, her bright hair and her long sunburnt neck uncovered almost to the delicate bosom having its source in a little shadow. He was carried utterly away. It seemed to him that he must lie flat on his face, without speaking or moving, lest he should choke with joy.

'Pigeons . . .' Her voice floated off, tranquilly. Then in the distance rose suddenly a sound and Alexander imagined he heard voices.

They both sprang to their feet and began instinctively to walk in the direction of the house.

'I can hear my mother,' said the girl.

He felt it would be somehow nice and courteous if he said:

'Is that your mother in the red blouse?'

'Yes . . . only that's not a blouse,' she answered in a rather deprecating tone. 'Are you going a long way?'

'I don't know how far it is.'

'What are all those baskets for?'

And feeling rather important, he answered:

'They're fruit-baskets. Every one has to be filled before we come back again.'

But although he spoke in a very bold way his excitement never ceased.

When they reached the house his uncle, the girl's mother, and another woman with fair hair and a pale pink dress and a rather cheerful, pretty face, whom he had not seen before,

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neither bosom nor backside. They're nothing but little apples.'

The women laughed and Uncle Bishop, in great spirits, suddenly began to shout a great many indiscreet things, saying farewell over and over again, alternately flicking the little horse and reining it tight again.

They began to move off at last. Alexander tried to smile. The wheels turned, a little faster every second. He was overcome by a sensation of being dragged somewhere against his will.

Then all at once, in a most subtle way, he was aware that the girl was watching him. He felt this as certainly as if she had held her finger-tips very close to his cheek. He turned impulsively, and beheld her with her chin resting on her hands and her hands resting on the top of the little gate, staring at him. The blood rushed to his cheeks, and filled with all his former joy, he kept turning and seeing her in that same careless, lovely watchful pose, while the cart drew steadily farther and farther away.

Finally he saw her no more. The house, the goat, the hens and at last the wood itself slipped into the distance. An unfamiliar, beautiful valley unfolded itself before his gaze. The dew had vanished and there was a hard brilliance about the sky as if it were a gem.

A clock chimed eleven. Uncle Bishop's breath smelt sweetly of wine. Alexander fixed his eyes on the distance, hardly knowing what he did, dreaming endlessly.

II

When they had driven a little longer the road made a sudden curve like a sickle, and while his thoughts were still of the girl and all that had taken place in the wood, a square stone house standing alone among dark clumps of trees came suddenly into sight. All other thoughts momentarily at an end, he gazed and asked:

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'Is this where she lives?'

'Hold hard,' said his uncle. 'You'll see her if you wait a moment. Go along with you and open the gate. Hullo! the damned dogs already! Go along and don't be frightened.'

As Alexander alighted and began to push back the massive iron gates a furious chorus of barking dogs greeted him, and suddenly six or seven bitches, all of the same black-and-brown breed and each very corpulent, rushed out at him from nowhere, yelping and snapping about his heels and striking terror into him. He hated dogs, and standing stock-still, cast one despairing look at his uncle, who at once leapt up like a fat old jack-in-the-box and began wildly brandishing his whip and shouting:

'Damn the dogs, get back! Damn the dogs!'

He jerked the reins excitedly. 'Get out, you scallywags!' he shouted afresh as the cart moved forward. 'God bless me, what does a woman want with seven dogs? Get back!'

The cart drove in and the yelping bitches were scattered in all directions. Partly to protect himself, and partly to show that he was not wholly afraid, Alexander seized the little horse's bridle and led it towards the house. Green lawns and a superb orchard lay before him. His gaze fell fascinated on scores and scores of trees stretching infinitely ahead.

Suddenly his uncle whispered a little excitedly:

'There's the old tit herself, yes, there she is. Coming towards us. See her?'

And looking up, Alexander saw approaching him a small, frail woman in black, wearing a snuff-brown bonnet and carrying a silver-knobbed walking-stick in her hands. She looked as if got up to match her dogs, who all instantly ceased barking and waddled towards her in a curious apathetic way, snuffing about her skirts. She walked as though on ice, hardly progressing at all, with her head and hands quivering in agitation, as if for ever dispatching little signals of terror

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and distress. Behind her came a white cat and yet another dog, an aged, weary creature who moved even more slowly than its mistress.

His uncle began to hobble across the lawn to meet her, muttering again, 'The old tit, the old tit!' at every step he took.

When he reached the old lady he formed an enormous trumpet with his hands, and bellowed into her ears like thunder:

'Glad to see you. Nice weather, God bless me. Not very lucky with the dogs again, I see.'

A little plaintive voice piped out, hardly audible, in reply:

'So you've come. No, no . . . it's awful. What with the boys stealing the fruit, and then the dogs having litters all the time. . . . The boys have broken the wall again. It's dreadful. I don't know what to do, people rob me right and left. What's it coming to?'

She turned her doleful, shaking head first to the garden, then to the dogs, half of which were heavy with puppies, and lastly to Uncle Bishop.

'Damn brutes!' he began. 'Not the dogs, I've nothing against dogs. The boys I mean. . . . Not the dogs. Why don't you do something?'

'What can I do?'

'Say your prayers. . . .' muttered Uncle Bishop in an undertone. 'The old tit. Say your prayers.'

'Wha-a-at? . . . Whose boy is that?'

'My nephew; Fanny's boy. Alexander, come and shake hands. He's twelve. Strong lad, isn't he?' he bellowed.

And Alexander, trying to bear out this statement, yet afraid of hurting the old woman, shook hands, and her hand seemed to him like a piece of cold fish and her eyes seemed ready to stream with tears as she looked at him.

'Would he like a piece of cake, do you think?' she said.

Alexander, not daring to refuse, although again not hungry, at once said 'Please.'

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'Please!' repeated his uncle in a staggering voice.

Nodding and quaking, the old lady turned and slowly retreated, all the dogs following her like mourners at a funeral. While she had gone Uncle Bishop gave the little horse its nose-bag and Alexander unpacked the fruit-baskets and set them on the grass.

After a long interval the procession returned. Alexander's uncle at once began a secretive whisper:

'She's rich, the old teaser. Her husband invented a patent candlestick and made a fortune, but he broke his neck on horseback. She had a son, but he's a lunatic and no one knows where he is, and so it's all hers, all the blessed money and this orchard, everything. Fetch the piece of cake, fetch it, fetch it—be on the right side of her, my boy, go along, fetch it.'

Alexander was forced to go and take from the old lady's quivering fingers a large triangle of bright yellow cake, which looked distasteful and sickly.

'It's saffron cake,' she said to him, in a trembling little voice.

What saffron cake was he did not know, but he tried to look as if he did know and as if he were very grateful. Then his uncle and the old woman began to discuss the fruit-gathering and he was left unnoticed, feeling awkward as he lingered about with the cake he did not want.

'The little golden plums on the bank are ripe, two trees of them,' he heard her say. 'Get them . . . get them all. The boys and the wasps are after them. And then there's a tree of pearmains: that's loaded, and there'll be none left if you leave them. Pears, there's two trees of pears, the big early ones at the end of the garden, and the little sweet pears. You know where they are. There's a ladder stands by the wall. You know where everything is, don't you? It's a poor year. Some of the trees are blighted, but you do as you think fit.'

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'You know you can trust us,' bellowed Uncle Bishop.
'You know that you always have trusted us.'

'Yes, I trust you.'

But while they were taking hooks and baskets and all the time they were walking down the long avenue of apples into the depths of the garden, Alexander was conscious of her eyes pursuing all their movements, as if she did not trust them. Her eyes reminded him of gooseberries, and he also felt that though she was so very deaf this deafness did not matter, since her sight was so uncanny and remarkable. And as he turned and shot a last furtive look along the avenue all the seven dogs and the white cat appeared to be watching him too.

'It's a garden, if you like, isn't it?' his old uncle kept whispering, as though the intricacy of the avenues and the never-ending branches stooping under a weight of red, yellow and green globes awed him. 'There's a peach, on the wall, and next to it's an apricot, but there's never a finger allowed on them, the old tit, not a finger. Don't you touch them, do you hear that? Eat what you like and fill your pockets, but she'll know almost if you look on that wall. God bless me if she won't.'

But Alexander, so much attracted by the garden, scarcely listened. Everywhere heavily laden trees stood, and as in the little garden in the wood, not a breath or leaf stirred itself, and the sunshine seemed to burn the stillness and came through the leaves with a soft liquid light. In odd places under the trees there were vegetable marrows, which he thought looked like fat sucking pigs asleep in the sunshine. In the distance some pigeons were cooing, and a flock of starlings flew up from an apple tree and soared away like black dust. They walked on and on. 'Did you ever see the like?' the old man kept saying. And then suddenly they came to a point where this level, tranquil order of things changed, and the garden dipped abruptly. They halted. Before them

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lay a kind of oval basin which it seemed to Alexander might have been a stone-pit in some bygone time. Here the trees hung from ledges and precipices and flourished in a toy green valley. 'Cunning,' he heard his uncle say. Very cunning and very wonderful indeed he thought it also as he stood there gazing with large eyes at the little golden plums in the grass, with a sensation as if the outer world had been left aside for ever.

'Get a basket. Let's begin,' said his uncle suddenly. 'The little yellow tree first of all.'

Alexander, rather dazed, took the basket in which lay the saffron cake, and though not hungry, he longed to taste the cake and the tempting, sweet-looking plums. And so he took first a bite at the strange-coloured cake and then at the fruit. The cake he concluded at once was poisonous, but the plums were like honey, and he went on eating them, hardly filling up the basket at all. And shortly, without fuss, and with an expression of sleepy indifference, he put some of the ripest plums in his pockets and dropped the saffron cake into long grass, like a stone.

As the work went on, Uncle Bishop at times murmured in a cracked bass some old song Alexander had heard already a hundred times, but which possessed for him still the same enchantment and surprise, and at others related all he knew of some old murder, very cold-blooded and gruesome, telling it all so skilfully and with such cunning pauses that Alexander would cease all movement, and sit on a branch or stand in the grass as if paralysed, not breathing, wondering if the climax would ever come. At times they were very silent. In these pauses the boy wished only that he might lie still in the shady grass, to sleep, or to watch with sleepy eyes the rabbits feeding in the green hollow. But each time a curious sense of pride prevented his doing this. And conscientiously he went on filling and refilling his basket with plums.

When the plum tree had been stripped the man sighed,

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and as if for reward, ate the first plum Alexander had seen pass his lips, and blew out his cheeks and spat the stone to an extraordinary height in the air. Then he seized his jacket and opened his watch and looked at the sun.

'Oh! Lord,' he muttered, scratching himself. 'It's nearly one. Fetch the basket.'

A sudden feeling of joy and relief filled Alexander, who felt as if he had been locked in a room and released.

When he returned with the basket Uncle Bishop was already seated under a large pear tree, stropping a magnificent clasp-knife on his trousers-knee in readiness.

'What have they put in for us?' he kept saying. 'What? Cold pie? What sort of a pie? What? . . . Rabbit? Never! God bless my buttons, but it must be. It can't be pigeon. It must be the rabbit Ursula bought from the gypsy. And what else? Give me the pie. God bless me, it's heavy, it must have been a hare. What else, my son?'

'Potatoes, cold beans, bread . . . cheese,' recited Alexander, 'and here's another pie, a fruit pie, yes, that's fruit, and here's something else. Bottles.'

'Bottles?'

After saying this, his mouth remained open and Alexander saw a look of sly astonishment creep into his face. Then he stretched out his hands and took the bottles from Alexander and slowly held them up to the sunshine, closing one eye deliberately. Presently he remarked:

'That's for you.'

'What is it?'

'Drink! Never mind what. Never ask what a drink is, it's not manners.'

And leaning backwards, Alexander drank slowly and deeply, scarcely tasting what he drank, but aware only of the satisfaction and coolness of drinking, until he felt as if the breath were being squeezed from his body and he could drink no longer. Suddenly, with a great burst for breath, he ceased

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and sat upright. His uncle was still drinking, with his head also thrown back, so that he looked to Alexander very like a man blowing a black trumpet from which no sound ever came. And as he watched, wondering how long this could last, the half-sweet, half-bitter taste of what he had drunk awoke in his mouth.

'Is yours herb beer too?' he leaned forward and asked.

His uncle did not answer, however, but suddenly smacking his lips and corking up the bottle, took his clasp-knife and cut the pie. Alexander received the leg of a rabbit, and immediately felt strangely important, as if he had been given a prize or had said something very witty and clever. He sat with his mouth open, staring.

'Eat, sonny, eat,' urged his uncle at once. 'There's beans too, and potatoes. Eat!' He waved his long arms about him to the trees and the sky. 'All the pears and the little red apples have to be gathered before we go, and it's a long journey.'

He himself cut two thick slices of bread and began to spear pieces of rabbit with the point of his knife, eating ravenously. A knife and fork had been packed up for the boy, but he felt it would be almost degrading and a little childish to use them, and rather furtively he took out a small tortoise-shell penknife and began spearing fragments of rabbit's flesh too. There was no time for conversation. And gradually everywhere grew silent. Hardly a bird spoke, and the thick wall of trees about them stood still and breathless. The sun lay directly overhead and Alexander could see the heat shimmering in waves beyond the baskets lying in squares and rings of yellow in the grass.

Soon he felt his thoughts fly back again to all that had happened in the wood. The same overbearing silence, the same heat, the same uncanny sense of utter stillness, without a quiver or breath! The picturesque little house, the old woman sitting staring like death, with a comb clasped in her

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hands, the pond, the sloe tree, and most vivid of all, the flowerets on the young girl's dress reflected in the shining dark water! He ceased eating and the faint sickness and shock of unexpected joy obsessed him.

'Come, eat your leg, eat your leg, boy!'

He started and responded mechanically, lifting the rabbit-leg in his fingers, and then sank into thought again.

As he sat there, alternately eating and dreaming, he could only wonder what she was doing, where she could be?

'If you don't want the leg, don't waste it. Have a little of this pie instead. Look, see the crust.'

He took a slice of pie, which had been made with late raspberries, gooseberries, damsons and a sprinkling of dew-berries. As he ate he looked up and asked:

'That man in the little house over there, he's very ill, isn't he?'

'Yes, God bless him; he won't live, poor fellow.'

'Shall you go back to see him?'

'We might and we might not. I don't know,' he said, shaking his head, and the boy felt driven back to silence.

During the remainder of that meal he did not speak again; only his uncle's answer, 'We might and we might not,' careered repeatedly through his head, troubling him.

Not long later the man, with a sleepy 'Don't you fidget, my son,' stretched back on the grass and closed his eyes. In obedience the boy sat for some moments very still, feeling as if he were the only creature alive in the still, drowsy noonday.

He rose presently and walked idly away. . . . The house appeared, its white stone exterior looking forbidding in the sunshine. He stood for some moments staring at it, and then turned abruptly down a little sloping path leading towards a group of firs. A grasshopper began chirring, and a low hum of wasps rose from the plum trees. Suddenly Alexander stared, slackened his pace, and then, gazing still

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harder at the object he saw under an apple tree just ahead, ceased walking altogether. Two small eyes like black beans returned his stare, and an intense sensation of guilt and nervousness refused to let him go forward or run away.

Before him sat a man, a very small person in a blue-striped shirt, a black cap and stone-coloured trousers fastened with a most handsome belt of plaited and twisted leather decorated with pieces of brass. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up, and on his right fore-arm a purple dragon had been tattooed and on his left there was a crimson bird, like a swallow, designed as if it were flying towards his shoulder. Alexander could not surmise if this man were old or young. He only felt that his thin face with its sharp nose, black little eyes and bony forehead was very, very cunning. And after a long silence, during which the eyes never flickered, he said falteringly in an apologetic voice:

'We're picking the fruit.'

'What's your name?' asked the man, with a very cunning squint and in a sharp arresting voice.

'I'm Mr. Bishop's nephew.'

The man thought a minute, then asked: 'Did you come in that cart with that little nag?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that's all about of a nag, that is. I wouldn't be seen dead with a nag like it. It's a midget!' he went on derisively. 'Don't you feed it?'

Alexander, who was devoted to the little horse, was too outraged to speak, and only nodded several times, staring at the other's thin, cunning face until he detested it. And then suddenly the man remarked:

'I've got a boy about your clip. How old are you?'

'Twelve,' said Alexander.

'Yes, he's about that. Perhaps he's older, though. I don't know, it's a job to tell.' And he informed Alexander

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abruptly: 'I've got fourteen children; you wouldn't believe that perhaps, would you?'

'Yes,' said Alexander at once, though he felt he couldn't believe a word.

'He was the first to be born after I came home from Turkey, he was. Seven came before Turkey, and seven after, and there's no doubt the first are the strongest. There's no doubt they are. Fine, strong women and men all of them, and two with children of their own. Only yesterday my eldest came to see me. He's with a duke—yes, he's a duke's servant—a duke with a name as long as your legs. I can't pronounce his name, no more could you. And this duke says to him, "Baxter," he says, "if there's any mortal thing you want while I'm away from home, you take it. Take it!" He was drunk—he drinks a lot, this duke—but it didn't matter, and no sooner's his back's turned than Wag—that's my son—orders another servant to kill a turkey and gets a leg of mutton and a little barrel of beer, besides a lot of waistcoats and a pair of gaiters—doeskin gaiters, mark you—gentlefolk don't know what they have got, they don't wear things out—and a pair of pants worn once and never a second more, and shoes and God knows what besides he didn't get—and I'll slit my throat if he didn't hire a conveyance and bring them home and say to me, "Dad, what with having fourteen of us and times hard, you could do with the Duke's trousers!" Oh! my God, I laughed till the tears rolled down my cheeks. Why I laughed I don't know, but there you are, he's my son, and he's a chip off the old block, and I'm proud of him. And money! Before he goes he says to me, "Dad, here's a quid," and he opens his pocket for me to look. And there they lay, hundreds of them, hundreds and hundreds of pounds like packs of playing cards, hundreds and hundreds. . . .'

During all this discourse Alexander grew more and more incredulous and yet more and more fascinated. He felt all

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the time that he was being told wonderful enormous lies. Everything he could do towards believing these lies he did, yet the thought of so much money, so many children, and the look of constant craftiness on the man's face defeated him.

He stood as if spellbound.

'Haven't seen the old lady about, I suppose?' asked the man suddenly, completely closing one eye and squinting up at Alexander with the other.

The boy shook his head.

'Good,' remarked the other, and took out a small clay pipe, very stained and dirty. 'She's a tough customer. No smoking in this garden—perhaps you don't believe that? Well, believe it or not, it's true. She's afraid she'll be burnt in her bed. Her husband, when he was alive, did nothing but experiment and experiment with things all day and all night long. And one night he set the house afire. . . . That's the reason. "Baxter," she says every morning, "don't you dare strike a match." ' Just at this moment the man did strike a match and began smoking. 'She's like some little cheese-mouse, twittering and trembling about her money. Not like a man I worked for once. He had money. God strike me, he had some money! "Baxter," he used to say to me, "if you want a glass of beer there's a bucket." A bucket! And I used to draw a bucket of beer as you might draw a bucket of water for your little old nag. . . . But he killed himself. Money! That's what money did for that man. Money ain't no good. The old lady, what's all her money bring? What's she got? Her only son in an asylum, and nobody, not a soul, to live with her—all alone—might as well be under the ground.'

This time Alexander followed the discourse without a thought for its truth, only fascinated profoundly, and as the man went on to tell more and more fantastic episodes he crept nearer and at last sat down at his feet.

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While listening he caught sight of an object lying partially concealed by the man's jacket. After some time he made out the fur, then the ears and whiskers of a dead rabbit. From its snout hung a globule of bright red.

'Did you catch that?' he asked, pointing at the dead animal.

'Not so loud. Did I catch what?' the man asked sharply, and pretended suddenly to be extremely stupid, looking everywhere except where Alexander was pointing.

'That!' repeated the boy.

'Where? What is it you're after? What you mean—"catch?"' There's nothing but slugs to catch here.'

To judge from his puzzled, apathetic movements the man looked as if he had just woken up. Nothing of his slyness remained. And yet Alexander felt that under this mask of stupidity the cunning was growing deeper.

He became silent, and the man took advantage of the silence to relight his pipe, while Alexander, nonplussed by this last change of attitude, wondered if he dare ask another question. After a long silence he did ask it:

'Do you live here?' he said.

'Over yonder, by the wood,' said the man.

'What's your name?' he ventured to ask, timidly.

'Smack. . . .'

As he uttered this, his mouth snapped shut as sharply as a mouse-trap, and with a sound very like a smack. This produced a great effect on Alexander, who sat open-mouthed for some moments before daring to say:

'Were you christened that?'

'Christened? . . . Lord God, my mother ran off all of a sudden, feeling a bit of a pain in the fields one day, and delivered me under a haystack. I wasn't christened.'

'Don't you go to church, either?'

His face screwed itself up with contempt.

'Church?' he said.

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Alexander was impressed by this also, and would have been glad to say how he too hated church, and that he did not understand the psalms or the sermon and could never remember the responses, and how he agreed with his Uncle Bishop that it was all popery and humbug, but suddenly the man drew out a bottle from somewhere and took an immense drink, a drink so long that it seemed to the boy that the bottle must have been emptied over and over again. When it ended the man stretched himself, licked his lips several times, and said suddenly:

'You look as if you've never seen a man drink. Why, my dad, if he were alive, poor old devil that I should ever say so, he'd tell you how he used to drink ten pints of a morning, mowing grass. . . .' He squinted and nodded with all his cunning, and then got nimbly to his feet.

Something at frequent intervals had been troubling Alexander, and now as the man prepared to leave him he felt an overwhelming desire to ask another question. And almost against his will he said:

'Do you know the people over there in the wood?'

'Which wood?' said the man.

'There's a little house,' began Alexander, and suddenly he felt a strange ache as he visualised it all, 'you can hardly see it, the trees are so thick. There's an old woman there and someone used to live there named Pollyanna, only she's married and bedridden now, because of her legs. And there's an old man—he's had an operation. It's over there, not very far. We passed it as we came this morning.'

All through this the boy's voice trembled and there lurked in his mind a picture of the young girl. Overcome by a suspicion that every word he spoke must reveal his inner feelings he began to stammer also. Anxiety and joy set up a conflict within him.

'In the wood, you say? The wood . . . but which wood?' said the man. 'There's so many woods.'

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'Over there,' said Alexander, almost desperately.

'No, I can't say. Lord Almighty, there's a good many people I don't know—thousands!'

Suddenly he cocked his eyes for the last time at Alexander, and walking very sharp like a sharp little dog down the narrow path, passed from sight.

When Alexander returned to the high bank overlooking the disused stone-pit his Uncle Bishop was stretching himself after his sleep.

'Cover the plums with a sack or two,' he began saying. 'That's it, that's it. The basket we'd better take down with us. Drink before you put the bottle away, drink, drink!'

'Where are we going?' asked the boy after drinking some herb beer.

'You take the baskets while I bring the ladder. Make straight for the big pear tree. Straight on, you couldn't miss it.'

Under an immense pear tree, on which the fruit hung almost like ropes of onions, the boy presently set down the baskets. A thick, angry hum of wasps met him, and some birds flew up with startled cries from among the branches. Half-rotted pears lay about in the grass under the tree, bored by wasps and pecked at by birds, and a faint odour of what he thought was like wine or balm met him as he walked round and round the tree, crushing pears with his boots and disturbing wasps in his anxiety to find a pear to taste.

'Try one, try one,' suddenly urged his uncle, who had come up behind, a little breathless, with the ladder.

Gaining courage from this, Alexander snatched a fine yellow pear from the tree and crushed his teeth into its unblemished skin. For ever afterwards a recollection of the rare flavour, the strange, wine-like odour and honeyed juice of this pear remained with him. His uncle had seized a pear also and was sucking it with quick gasps of pleasure. Even more excited than Alexander about the fruit he kept opening

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his eyes extremely wide, until they shone like blue glass marbles.

Neither the man nor the boy for some time uttered a word. At last Uncle Bishop said:

'You must put a few in a bag for yourself. Not yet, later on. And don't let the old tit see you do it.'

Alexander neither did nor said anything in answer to this, but remained spellbound for some moments under a sudden notion which had flashed into his head.

And throughout the afternoon this same idea of taking something, perhaps a plum or pear, as a gift to the girl never ceased to attract and trouble him. Screened by the thick leaves from view, he would sometimes gather a pear, rub it to a polish on his shirt and put it aside very religiously and tenderly. If however a bruise or crack appeared, he would drop it, feeling a sense of acute loss, into the basket. The afternoon slipped by. Once as he was gathering a pear from a high branch he heard a rustling in the grass beneath him. He started and looked down to see four or five dogs snuffing about the baskets. He heard the old woman coming, too. Her snail-like approach and the remembrance of her keen sight made it agonising for him to sit in the tree without movement or sound.

Then she carried on a conversation with his uncle which seemed to him to go on and on, everlastingly.

'Oh! the wasps, you see the destruction they cause,' she wailed. 'The fruit all eaten away! If it goes on like this I shall have nothing. Dear, dear, just look at it. Just look. It drives me out of my mind to think about it. What shall I do? Come away, Pretty, come away, naughty creature. There's nothing for you. Oh! dear, dear. If it weren't for the labour I'd have all the trees down, I'd have them all down to-morrow, and there'd be an end of it all.'

All her troubles and griefs had to be poured into Uncle Bishop's ear. Over and over again she complained and

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sighed, until Alexander felt that he must drop off the branch with exhaustion and suspense.

Worst of all, she at last looked round and asked in a quaking, suspicious voice:

'Where's the little boy?'

'Oh! he's gone off,' bellowed Uncle Bishop. 'Lord knows where, but he's not far away. Down among the rabbits, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Look after him,' she implored. 'Don't let him touch them. I wouldn't have them touched, not for anything. No one's ever killed one, and no one ever shall, I can't bear it.'

'They'll eat you out of your bed before very long!' muttered Uncle Bishop brutally, not loud enough for her to hear.

'Don't let him touch them, don't let him touch them,' was all she said.

A moment later she had begun to shuffle away, all the dogs trailing in a waddling, abject string behind her skirts. A long time elapsed before she passed out of sight and the boy had courage to move again. When he descended at last and looked about him it seemed as if the sun were already lower in the sky.

III

When evening began to come on at last, Alexander and his uncle carried back to the house all the fruit they had gathered, and under the supervision of the old lady, who stood tottering a little distance off, weighed and measured it, Alexander writing down the figures with extreme care on a sheet of paper. All the dogs and the white cat were also there, staring like wooden things or dragging themselves about the grass on their bellies, never running or barking. The little horse seemed to have grown impatient and stood restlessly stamping and frisking against the evening flies. The boy shared this

impatience, fixing his mind constantly on the time when they must pass through the wood, longing desperately to depart.

'Does the little boy understand figures?' the old lady wanted to know. 'He won't make mistakes!'

'Bless you, he goes to school!' shouted Uncle Bishop, with pride and force. 'What he doesn't know isn't worth knowing. Nowadays things are different. They're taught everything, every mortal thing you can wish. Why, he learns Latin now—Latin! God bless your heart, he could write all the names of these apples and pears down for you in Latin.'

'What good would that do?'

'A good deal, you bet your life, a good deal. The boy wouldn't do it for nothing. He's got a head on him—you see for yourself. Turn round, my boy. There, you can see now—his head's as big as a pumpkin.'

Uncle Bishop never lost an opportunity of showing how proud he was of Alexander, and to complete the force of this pride he often exaggerated and frequently told lies. And as he turned round in order to display his head, Alexander felt extremely foolish and half-scowled in vexation. He longed for his uncle to pay his accounts and ached for the sound of wheels again. But his uncle dallied a little longer, and patting the boy's head, at last said to him:

'Now, you go over and show the lady what you've written. Go along.'

Alexander held out the paper in silence.

'I see, I see,' she said, squinting and trembling more than ever. 'Good lad, he writes well.' And for a long time he had to stand at her side, writing down all the figures his uncle shouted, vexed and uneasy. During this time he discovered that a strange smell hung about her, compound of preserved cloth, dogs, camphor, horse-beans and something dry and musty. And so much fruit had to be weighed and accounted for that he felt at last as if he had breathed this queer odour all his life.

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The sun had plunged behind the largest tree before his uncle and the old woman vanished into the house to settle the accounts. All the dogs disappearing also, he was left alone and sat on a little wooden bench with great relief, wondering what time it could be and how soon a start would be made. Then shortly his face assumed an intense, meditative expression.

'Shall I get the apricot?' he thought. 'Could I go back into the garden without being seen?'

And presently, followed by the indistinct voices of his uncle and the old woman, he edged away and strolled in an indifferent manner down the path under the trees. His heart seemed to swell, beating with ponderous thumps. All things were flagged and hushed. An army of shadows advanced to meet him. His footsteps awoke echoes infinitely, making him turn round in fear, as if other footsteps were following him. Mysterious objects under the trees made him start and hasten too.

Suddenly he became aware of footsteps coming not from behind, but before. His impulse was to turn and run, but for some strange reason he ceased walking.

Then a figure appeared. It was Smack. Approaching very slowly, he began to say as soon as he saw Alexander:

'Oh, it's you, it's you, is it? God strike me, it looked like the old woman.' The boy remained dumb, simply gazing at the sack of either apples or potatoes that the man was carrying.

'You're like my son Squint, you are,' Smack went on, 'he creeps about on hands and knees and gets atop of you before you hear a sound. Why, I've seen him drop on a hare like you might drop on a beetle. Perhaps you wouldn't believe that? Well, believe it or not, but there it is. He's a miracle. . . . "Squint," I says to him one day, "you can drop on hares, but could you drop on a fox?" He looks at me and says "Could I drop on a fox?"—just like that. That's

all. He's like that. But next day there was a meet. Full cry they came across from these woods, all the pinks and the ladies thinking they would be in at the kill, and the dogs running like mad. I was there, with Squint, behind a hedge. All of a sudden there's a gallows of a row, and God bless my poor old mother, the fox walked through the hedge. Dainty! I never saw a wedding where there was anything so dainty. And there she stood. She never moved. She just looked at Squint, and Squint—what did he do? God strike me, but he dropped on her, he dropped on her. And when the hunt came up, there he stood, there stood our Squint with his arms round the fox's neck.'

And once again Alexander was carried away by the cunning of it all. Almost hypnotised by nods and winks he did not know what to say. But suddenly Smack asked him sharply:

'Where's the old woman, eh?'

'She's in the house, settling the accounts up,' stammered Alexander.

'In the house, eh?'

'They've just gone in.' And abruptly he gathered courage to ask: 'You didn't remember the name of the people in the wood, did you, after all?'

'Name of the people in the wood?'

'There's an old man, and two women who . . .' began the boy.

But Smack shook his head, this time almost sorrowfully, as if he hated not being able to conjure up some answer.

'Perhaps I know them,' he said at last. 'There's thousands of people I do know, thousands. I dare say I know them.'

'There's a girl,' persisted Alexander.

'A girl?' the other repeated. 'A girl?' And suddenly he managed to attach to that word something incredulous, cynical, mocking, and his thin lips and eyes squeezed themselves into a repellent smile.

Directly afterwards he laughed and sidled off, and Alexan-

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der found himself walking rapidly towards the wall bearing the apricot tree, no longer afraid, but driven by a feeling of desperation and wretchedness. All his sweetest, most tender emotions felt wounded. It seemed to him monstrous that what aroused in him elation and joy should have struck Smack as contemptible and petty. He did not understand and felt that it was all horrible, that in some strange way he had betrayed a mysterious and precious trust. Only the intensity of his own beliefs comforted him.

He hurried on. He resolved suddenly to snatch the apricot quickly, and, regardless of everything, run as fast as possible back to the house again.

In the dying sunlight the apricot trees had a rich, luxuriant, exclusive look about them. On the third tree hung a very special apricot he had noted several times. He plucked it, quickly and gently, and began to run.

He emerged from among the trees just in time to hear the voice of his uncle begin impatiently shouting:

'Where are you? Where are you? Boy! Where have you been? Here, here . . . tell us what ninety-three pence make. Ninety-three pence . . . what? Come here, you'd better come inside. Take your cap off. And remember if the old tit asks you anything shout in her ear. Shout! Now make haste, go along the passage.'

Alexander was hurried into a gloomy passage, where he noted a strong odour of damp and mice and saw several pairs of antlers branched from the walls and a stuffed white owl staring down at him. When at a furtive whisper from his uncle he entered a door on the right, he saw the old lady, now with spectacles on, sitting alone at a shining oval table. A good deal of money, with three or four dark red leather bags and heaps of bills were strewn about. Again the odour of damp and mice met him. All the furniture was of pale yellow wood, with faded blue damask upholstery and many cushions. Little pairs of milky green and pink glass vases

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stood on a white mantelpiece, like small dolls preening themselves in the large mirror behind. Something dead, old-fashioned and sad lurked about the room, and to the boy it seemed full of memories, of the lingering presences of men and women who had once lived, talked and perhaps sung and danced there. He noticed that the walls were covered with old portraits, every other portrait looking like a picture of the Saviour, except that all the figures were wearing bowler hats and deerstalkers and white silk neck-ties.

'Go in, go in,' urged his uncle, giving him little impatient punches from behind.

He advanced and stood silently before the table, staring at the heaps of money.

Suddenly his uncle began to say at the top of his voice:

'Here's the boy. He'll manage it. It'll be put right before you can wink.'

The old lady turned and searched Alexander's face with sharp squints. 'Mind you do, and don't make mistakes,' she said.

'That's all right, you trust him,' bawled his uncle. 'Now, my son, tell the lady what ninety-three pence are.'

Alexander, a little bewildered, had to think a moment before replying. 'Seven and ninepence,' he said at last

'Shout!'

'Seven and ninepence,' he shouted.

'Seven and ninepence?' she repeated. 'Are you sure? You haven't made a mistake, have you? If you think you haven't made a mistake, write it down . . . just there . . . write it down.'

Alexander took from her shaking fingers a small black pen, with which he wrote down the figures seven and nine with laborious care in an old, dirty book. As he wrote, her stiff sleeves brushed against him and he was continually afraid that she would feel or smell or in some other way divine that he had the apricot about him. All the little tremors and starts of her body alarmed him.

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'Has he written it?' She croaked suspiciously after a silence. 'I can't see.'

'Yes, he's written it!' proclaimed his uncle. 'You can trust him. What you want is a light.' Twilight was rapidly creeping through the room. 'You're not likely to see. Haven't you got some sort of a lamp?' he asked.

'Wha-a-t!'

'A lamp! You want some sort of a light on the subject or else you won't know shillings from ha'pence.'

'What does he say?' she turned and asked Alexander in a puzzled voice.

But this was never answered, for suddenly his Uncle Bishop snatched out his matches and struck a light, letting it flare up in his fingers. The old woman stood at once petrified, all her features white and stiff with horror. Then she began to struggle, as if choking, her eyes bulged, her hands waved hither and thither, she tried to stand up, her head looked as if it must totter off with rage, and then at last she croaked out in a terrible voice:

'What are you doing, what are you doing? Put it out at once! Oh! you wicked man, you wicked man! You mustn't do it, I won't have it! Put it out at once!'

Her voice was thin and rasping. 'Put it out, you wicked man! Put it out!' she kept saying in fury.

Uncle Bishop's mouth fell open, and without a word he pinched out the flame with his fingers. There was silence. The boy dared not stir.

Then the old lady began another struggle: she tried to calm herself, to sit down, to administer reprimands, but only infuriated trembling went on accompanied by a strange half-hissing, half-rattling sound. Gradually she coiled herself up, trembling less and less, like a spring, until she sank into the chair again. As she became quieter the silence seemed to become more and more intense. A little smoke wandered through the air and the pungent odour of it

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spread about the room. But the boy hardly dared to look or smell.

After what seemed an interminable silence, the old woman held up one finger and shook it admonishingly at Uncle Bishop for a long time. 'You must never do that,' she said. 'I never allow that—I never allow a naked light, not even in the garden, not anywhere. Did you want to frighten my life out?'

'Let me pay you what I owe. That's enough. God damn it, what next, what else?' he muttered. 'Let me pay you!'

'You might have been the death of me!' she quavered.

He did not heed, however, and began to shout with increased impatience:

'Never mind that, let's pay you and be off; we shall have dark on us.'

Still she remained unenlightened, muttering constantly about life, fire, and death, until the man mustered suddenly a thunderous shout:

'Let me pay you, do you hear, let me pay you!'

When she heard at last, there was a change in her demeanour. After an abrupt jerk of her head towards the table and a rapid fluttering of her hands about the bills and leather money-bags, an excited, almost skilful motion, as if she were working on a lace-pillow, she suddenly looked up at Alexander almost gratefully and asked him to add up a little column of figures.

'Add them carefully,' she warned him, however. 'Be very careful, your uncle's money isn't to be thrown away.'

'Never mind her. Add them up quickly,' urged his uncle. 'She's scared out of her life because we might cheat her. But it's all right, never mind, you just tell her what amounts to.'

'Three pounds, seven and a penny,' said Alexander after a feverish interval.

'Tell her. Shout!'

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Urged on by his uncle, he found something delightful in shouting, deliberately:

'Three pounds, seven shillings and a penny,' several times over.

His uncle began to count out the money, the woman nodding her head with a sort of feverish anticipation. When the three notes, the silver and the odd penny were being passed across the table, he kept shouting:

'Are you satisfied? Are you satisfied?'

'If you are,' she said. 'I am if you are.'

'Thank God for that!'

'Shall I get the reins untied?' asked Alexander.

'Yes, off you go! I'll be there before very long!'

As he left the room and hurried along the gloomy passage he was overcome by a sense of great relief, followed by elation. Reaching the yard, he heard a sound and turned to see all the seven fat dogs following him. He clapped his hands loudly, hastening them into retreat. He felt he was sick of dogs, money, the dark house and the rasping voice and ever-quivering head and fingers of the old woman. He touched the apricot in his pocket repeatedly, feeling very happy. Aroused by his approach, the little horse began to show signs of joy too, stamping one foot, tossing its head and tinkling the harness. Alexander stroked the horse's nose and then untied the reins and climbed into the cart.

Five minutes later all was ready. Surrounded by the seven dogs, who crawled about like huge beetles in the approaching twilight, the old woman muttered a few departing words:

'You must come again,' she said, and it almost seemed as if she regretted their departure. 'It's a bad year, and there's no peace from the boys, but there's a few black plums, and if anyone does have them it shall be you. They're very good. Shall I expect you?'

'Yes, you can expect us!' shouted the man, impatient to flick the whip.

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'Here, little one,' she then said.

And into the boy's outstretched hands she reached up and put first a small apple, on which already birds had been feeding, then a piece of cake, this time made with fruit and baked very hard, and lastly a penny. Then she looked up at him softly and said:

'God bless you.'

And these words seemed to transport him into a rare, trance-like frame of mind, so that he was hardly conscious of her face, the grey house and the seven stupid faces of the dogs slipping gradually away from him, and of the cart beginning to move forward smoothly and steadily into the summer twilight.

IV

They drove forward at an even more leisurely pace than that of the morning. Frequently the little horse walked, the man not using the whip except to flick the air. The baskets creaked under their great weight and the wheels made a monotonous grinding sound. Elsewhere the same tranquil, almost sleepy hush prevailed as in the early morning and at noon, and the same summer odours remained and the same sense of rich and lovely fruitfulness; only outlines and colours were changed; everything shaped itself by degrees of shadow and not light, and it seemed as if flowers and leaves were resting after intense toil, colourless and drooping, simply releasing breaths of heavy perfume.

Ever since morning the boy had been conscious of casting his thoughts forward to this time. Now, as he began to arrive near the fulfilment of them, he felt a desire to travel as swiftly as they had done. To sit still and not surge recklessly on at the pace of thought was an agony. And before long he could not resist asking:

'Let me drive.'

'You! It's too dark. You sit still and eat the old tit's cake.'

THIRTY TALES

'Shall we be long?'

'We're almost in the wood.'

There was something calm and reassuring about these words. He saw the dark belt of trees grow closer and vaster, as though it would reassure and protect him. The singing season was almost past, and owls and jays alone would call in the twilight, but there seemed to him something singing and jubilant in the silence and half-darkness, and gradually his mind filled itself with thoughts and images of a singing, dream-like quality also. And so the distance was obscured, the fading sky retreated and solitary trees standing like dark ghosts seemed to creep away or dissolve where they stood, and nothing remained but the wood standing ready to receive them into its bosom. The little horse slowed to a walk, its feet padding the dust as softly as if shod with leather. The wheels scarcely turned. Nothing called, nothing seemed to happen. . . . Alexander's hand crept to his pocket and closed about the apricot. And then, simultaneously, to the accompaniment of myriads of echoes rising like a confusion of voices, the wood closed about him, and the air he breathed became cooler, sharply sweet with a scent of damp leaves and of evening time and decay.

They drove on and on. Sounds became more numerous, and the wood seemed to be quivering with life. In the echoes of hoofs and wheels, in the stirring branches, in the rustle of invisible creatures over dead leaves, in passing moths, in the cries of birds, in his own breathing, there was something urgent and vital. Sounds seemed to run on before him, heralding his coming.

More and more, however, he became troubled by the thought that this coming might signify nothing. He was oppressed by uncertainty, and he dared not ask if they might stop in the wood.

All he dared to say, in a casual tone as if he had half-forgotten its existence, was:

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'Isn't this where we stopped at a house?'

But there was no answer. He waited, and not daring to repeat his question, looked cautiously at his uncle's face, and seeing something passive and preoccupied about it, looked away quickly without a word, lapsing into a mood of half-painful, half-joyful expectancy.

He was astonished a moment later by feeling the cart suddenly come to a standstill. No house was visible, and he did not understand the reason of it all until his uncle climbed out and began striking matches for the lamps.

In order to relieve his wonder completely, he half-whispered, however:

'What's the matter?'

There was a low grunt in answer. Then, as he watched the lamplight swell into a soft circle in the surrounding darkness, he felt unresistingly borne upon him an image of the girl's young, sweet face, filling him with an exuberance of happiness mingled with pain and longing, all the sublime emotion of first ecstasy transforming him, filling his soul with something so fresh, so joyous and amazing that he felt he could not have spoken or that he could scarcely have looked at her even had she suddenly appeared in the lamplight. He felt that he would suffer deeply if he never saw her again, knowing at last, and for the first time in his life, the meaning of suffering as he already knew the meaning of joy.

He was scarcely conscious of the cart moving forward again, the lamplight floating constantly before them like a yellow cloud, the air growing cooler under the trees. His mood of ecstasy resembled a tide, flowing in upon him wave after wave, and his thoughts became tangled and he gained only an impression of trees, very dark and monarchical, endlessly passing and passing.

A light appeared in the wood at last, and startled him abruptly from this mood of entrancement. He became alert

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and conscious of realities, sitting upright and tense. As he saw the light approaching and enlarging, he felt himself seized with sudden courage, and he said quickly and almost sharply, as if afraid his voice would break:

'Are we going to stop here?'

'Good Lord, what should we stop for?' came the answer. 'At this time of night? God bless me, we've nothing to stop for; we've long enough to go without that. What's the matter? Eat the cake she gave you if you're hungry. Fill your belly a bit. It's a long way, my lad, out of the wood and through the valley. A long way yet.'

It seemed as if he did not listen to these words. He became aware of them instead as one becomes aware of a flock of birds flying from an horizon. The character of each word is lost in the whole as the individuality of each bird is lost in the flock; only about their meaning, as of the species of bird, there remains no doubt. And he did not answer, feeling once again that he could not trust himself to speak, and also that perhaps he would have cried if he had begun to speak. A white moth flew past, and he felt that just as swiftly and irrevocably had the light of the house flown by before he could raise a hand to catch it. A great oak stumbled towards them like a malformed creature and lurched into darkness. All things retreated or moved endlessly on and on. Only he himself, clinging to his precious thoughts, remained unmoving, not able to resist the wretchedness overpowering him.

Again the little horse fell into the same unbroken leisurely pace as in the early morning. Soon they passed out of the wood, reaching open fields under a calm deep-blue sky sown with stars. A smell of harvest would come, pass away, and be renewed, stronger and stronger.

His uncle began to murmur some old song, as he had done under the plum trees.

His wretchedness became complete, and his thoughts raced

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backward to the morning. With strange sharpness he saw the sunshine begin to beautify everything again, the golden, unfamiliar countryside, the harvesters, the distant woods, the dew clinging to the leaves—and at last the house, the hot, sweet garden, the unbroken stillness into which the girl had come like a vision, silently too.

The song went on. And to the boy it seemed that nothing so beautiful or memorable had ever taken place in his life, and as he recalled the moments by the pond, under the sloe tree, his unhappiness was mingled suddenly with an ecstatic joy. He felt that there was a strange sharp pleasure even in disappointment, even in the pain of not seeing her again.

The sleepy voice of his uncle sang drowsily on for long afterwards. Something in it alternately pained and fortified him. Then he would feel half-ashamed, half-foolish as he remembered all his secret thoughts, all his idealising of the girl throughout the long day. Once he caught an image of her face, beautifully fresh and enchanting in all its detail, and filled with an agony of bliss he asked himself over and over again:

‘Why didn’t we stop there? Shall I ever see her again? Will she remember me?’

When this mood, like all others, had exhausted itself, he passed into a long tranquillity. Familiar fields and trees appeared in the darkness, and the horse began travelling a little faster, as if sensing home. He brooded quietly now on the day that had passed, turning it over and over in his mind like some legend almost too wonderful to believe, mingling with it strange tales he had heard, things he had treasured up in his soul long, long ago, and he thought with special pleasure of the little house, the woman whose name was Cilla, the great fruit garden, the dogs, the little sharp man who had told him wonderful lies, and the old woman saying ‘God bless you’ as they drove away, his mind filling moment by moment with a mysterious elation and joy.

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Soon they drove into a street by the river and so into a little yard. He saw the familiar sycamore tree, obscure sheds, low black stables, and then the house, throwing a stream of light on the tree.

At the sound of their approach a door opened, and there appeared first an old fat woman with a shawl over her head, then his aunt, a little shrewd, quick person who ran hither and thither like an ant, and lastly his mother, plump, rosy-faced and looking rather like a kind, soft-hearted nurse.

They began to pour out a stream of arguments and questions and to remonstrate severely with his uncle, who did not once reply.

'Where have you been, what's been happening to you? Oh! dear, keeping the boy out in that cart, I wonder you don't die of shame. What's been happening, Alexander? Aren't you cold riding in the cart? I wonder he isn't perished. Hot, did you say? Yes, in day-time I'll own, but the dews are so heavy. It's not sense—I'd be ashamed. Jump you down, my lamb. Lord, there's dew on the cart, bless me if there isn't. Jump you down and come indoors. Lord love us!'

To all this he said nothing. He felt that the three women, particularly Ursula and even his mother, were being foolish. In the cart it had been peaceful and he had dreamed. Not to relinquish this peace or these dreams seemed everything to him. He turned slowly and walked away.

Ursula hobbled after him to the house. As he reached the door and she ushered him into the light she broke out again:

'What happened, my lamb? Did you stop anywhere?'

He shook his head; a sharp feeling half of wretchedness, half of aching joy, swept over him; with difficulty he murmured: 'No, we didn't stop anywhere.'

With these words he heard the little horse walking away to its stable and the last tinkle of chains, and with the cry of an owl, with the closing of a door somewhere, with his

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uncle's voice asking if all were locked for the night, he felt that the strange long eventfulness of the day was closing, was being shut away from him like a book. He sat motionless, not knowing whether to laugh or cry with overwhelming happiness and pain.

And suddenly, his heart very full, he felt that everything which had filled and beautified the day had at last slipped away into the past, and lay in his mind like a clearly remembered dream.

He could only sit silent in wonder. The day had passed, the journey was at an end.

When would another begin?

THE MOTHER

SOMETIMES she is actually awakened at four or five by the muffled bumps of his feet on the wooden stairs, but more often than not she sleeps on, only a sigh or the slightest tremor of her body unconsciously marking her recognition of his rising.

She sleeps peaceably enough. Neither the jangle of crocks and spoons nor the hiss of the thick slices of bacon disturbs her. Whatever song her son bellows or whistles out above the frying-pan she does not hear. The clatter of his boots on the red floor has no effect. She hears nothing; sleeps through everything.

But when, three-quarters of an hour later, he shuts the door behind his back and stamps or shuffles his way over a yard of embedded stones and mud, she wakes. Her whole body is awake. The nature of the sounds he makes on going out into the morning does not matter. Only the quick, double movement of the door is important, never failing to bring her to consciousness.

From that moment she cannot sleep. In winter she lies staring blankly until day makes slits of light in the blackness and an odd sparrow chirps. In summer he has no sooner gone than she is at the threshold over which he has a moment before passed. Her body, though old, is alight from years of sun. She stands and looks quietly, then disappears to eat and wash, her mind dwelling on him.

Knowing she cannot expect to see him before six in the evening, or in autumn, nine or ten, she keeps some sort of communion, in the cottage in winter, or under the sunlight outside when summer comes. Thus, always, her head full of shy, half-coloured thoughts, she will wait for the return of her son. He is her youngest, the last at home, unmarried and past thirty. His cheeks, brown and level, proclaim his breed no less than his tallness, his black

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hair, and his trousers tied below the knee with odd, dirty pieces of string.

Her body will scarcely stir through the hot summer hours. Astute, wise in matters of quietness, she is utterly silent. Her face has a strange pallor as she listens to the birds in the wooded hollow or the bees moaning up and down the dark, red-flowered bean rows. Very often she eats nothing. Her strength seems to lie within her, conserved by that quiet wisdom of the very old. With a regularity which does not perturb her, hours of thought, shadows, little noises, great quietnesses, clouds and sun go softly past her.

Evening comes; the currant bushes lie in shadow. She closes her eyes, which, behind their placid feint of sleep, begin to dance, with sharp-coloured lights, green, orange and red. Her hands twitch, her body behaves in a restless, unwise way that sucks her strength. The bees and birds cease to interest her. The scents of stocks and pinks and the pungent whiffs of dry grasses are lost on her. With eyes shut she inhabits a delicious warm darkness, anticipant, trembling.

'Abel!' she suddenly calls. 'Abel!'

He arrives. At the window or her seat in the late sunshine she watches, trembling more than ever, her hands keeping a continual play against each other, nervous and pitiful, and sometimes she will use them to deaden the sudden rise of her shallow bosom that seems to swell up and up, beyond her strength.

Neither a sound nor movement of his escapes her. She is absorbed in the spectacle of his slushing among half a dozen swine, suddenly hungrily rampant after a quiescent day of sun. Every step of his through the dark, dung-wet earth is recorded. Her ears dwell on the sound of his voice, 'Blast you! Keep still!' and the storm of feet that precedes and follows it. The squeals from the lissom, dirty, pinkish-yellow draws a smile or two from her. Her body feels warm. She sniffs the air, scentless to her except for that animal smell

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she will associate with him for ever. The suck-suck of the pigs seems to have ended. There are no sounds except those of his feet, tramping dully, and of his voice, humming abstractly some tune. On his advancing figure her watch is continuous. He slouches nearer, by no means handsome, and in every way awkward, dull, unclean, reeking thickly of the sties. But she watches. Again that uprising of her breast asserts itself sharply. But she watches. The warmth rises, delicious, then again painful and heavy.

He comes nearer. The warmth conquers her breast and throat. It assails her head. She is numb. She wonders dully why it is she can no longer see him.

DEATH IN SPRING

WE had walked up the wood for the second time to look at the young foxes. It was lovely April weather, windless and sunny in the wood under the leafless oak trees and the slender grey ashlings. The old hazels were yellow with catkins, and the primroses made drifts of yellow distances wherever we turned to look; the bluebells were darkly budded and the first purple orchids had unfolded and the first oxlips. The riding ran through the wood from east to west, smooth and green and wide enough for ten horses to canter abreast; it was flooded with sunlight and out of the shelter of the trees we could feel the west wind very soft on our faces, blowing straight from the corner of the wood where the foxes were.

At the end of the riding we stood still and listened. We had walked up slowly and quietly, without speaking. To the right of us stood an old shooting-hut built of straw and hurdles, and on the left was a long mound of earth burrowed with fox-holes, and bare except for young nettles and a clump or two of elder. On the far side of the mound was a pond, the trees growing down to the edge of it, making the water black with the motionless reflections of their thick trunks and branches. A day or two before I had come upon ten or twelve fox-cubs playing in and out of the bushes of elder. An east wind had been blowing and they had not scented me. They were pretty, amusing, impish things, a little lighter in colour than earth, their soft hair ruffled in the wind like the feathers of birds. Sometimes they trotted down to the edge of the pool and looked at the water, and sometimes they roamed off into the wood itself, through the dark green stretches of dog's-mercury to where the tide of primroses began. Wherever they went they moved quite soundlessly, with a fine, fox-like assurance and a grace of movement more beautiful than in all other young woodland creatures.

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A rabbit scuttled away noisily among the dead wood and undergrowth as we came to a standstill. I stooped and looked between the undergrowth at the fox-burrows: the wind was blowing our scent towards them and the mound was deserted. Irene moved her feet and cracked an ash-twigg, and a young rabbit made off wildly from under a tangle of old honeysuckle wood. I looked at her quickly and she smiled. She had never yet seen a fox-cub or even an old fox. As we had come up through the wood she had gathered anemones, and her hands were full of them and she had put a dark violet in her mouth. She smiled with her lips closed, sucking the sweetness of the violet stem at the same time. The air was elusively fragrant with the scent of the flowers she was holding and of the thousands of primroses lying everywhere like pools of yellow and green.

I moved cautiously forward for a pace or two until I was level with the shooting-hut. A young fox came suddenly up from a burrow and gazed at me as though puzzled, head sideways and ears cocked, and another trotted noiselessly over the brow of the mound towards the pool.

Irene came up behind me and I pointed out the cub, drawing down her head so that her line of sight should be level with mine. Her hair brushed my cheek. We stood motionless and the fox was motionless too, his eyes impish and bright and filled with a wise mistrust of us. He watched us for a minute, and then without haste turned tail and vanished down the burrow again.

'You saw him?' I whispered.

She nodded.

'You see they are timid,' I said. 'If we could skirt the wood and come up on the far side of the pond we should see them better.'

'Shall we go then?' she whispered.

There was a gate at the end of the riding, and we had only to climb it and walk across a piece of pasture land and skirt a

DEATH IN SPRING

corner of the wood. I was moving towards the gate when suddenly I heard a faint cough and a second later a voice saying:

'I should hardly do that if I were you. You were quite right. They are very timid to-day.'

We turned at once and looked towards the shooting-hut. The voice was very quiet and dignified, and had about it also something tremulous and faded, as though it belonged to someone very old. We stood still for one moment. I could see nothing, and suddenly the voice spoke again.

'Come in, won't you? There's plenty of room. I shan't eat you.'

We walked towards the shooting-hut, glancing at each other rapidly every second or two, until we stood in the doorway. The sunlight made an angle of light across the dry earth floor, and beyond the sunlight—on a rough seat of split hazel sticks running along the back of the hut—an old man was sitting, with a double-barrel sporting gun across his knees. It was difficult to believe that he had ever spoken to us. He seemed at once voiceless and spiritless. He looked incredibly old, and he sat as immobile as a mountain, the skin of his long, sunken face the colour of a dead corn-husk and more transparent, so that the veins shone softly through it like a fragile network of lavender threads, so faint in colour that the dead shining yellowness of the flesh itself was hardly broken. He was dressed in an old pepper-and-salt sporting jacket with breeches to match, and coarse green stockings that hung loosely on his thin legs like moss on an old stick; he looked as if he had long ago lost even the strength to dress himself; his knee-buttons were half undone and his jacket hung open, showing underneath it a waistcoat of faded canary yellow, with the ends of a thick green silk neckerchief drooping across it and tucked away into the armpits. His hat was an old square grey bowler; he wore it at a slight angle towards his right ear, showing a wisp, like a mere silver

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petal, of his thin hair. The jaunty poise of the hat and the eyes looking at us from underneath it were both symbols of life. The eyes were wonderful. His body was like an aged tree, and his eyes were like two miraculous young leaves. They looked at us as we came to the door of the hut with a vivid expression almost naïve in its intense brightness; they did not move, except to lift themselves the finest fraction in order to watch our faces; the light falling upon them redoubled their life, illuminating their colour until it shone like melting ice, infinitely blue and more beautifully vivid; they were like the eyes of a child or of a young girl, full of unquenchable life and curiosity and wonder.

He looked at us in silence for perhaps ten seconds or more; it seemed a long time, and then he made a slight gesture with one hand, lifting two or three fingers from the stock of his gun.

‘Come inside, come inside,’ he repeated.

His voice and his simple gesture of the upraised fingers were full of a profound courtesy. We walked into the hut. His eyes rested on us steadily and attentively, and then he moved a fraction along the seat. We had been his guests from the moment of entering.

‘Sit down, won’t you? Sit down. You can look straight across at the foxes from here—good view of ’em,’ he went on. ‘Sit one on each side of me. That’s right, that’s right,’ he murmured. ‘It’s a clear view if they come. But I doubt if they will—I doubt it. Wrong wind. They’re getting older too.’

He spoke very slowly, pausing between the phrases, his wet, strengthless red lips quivering in the act of finding his words. He stared into the wood while talking; the sunshine as it fell through the half-leaved branches was broken up into endless flakes of quivering yellow light: he seemed to be watching their inexhaustible dance on the dark earth covered with flowers and bright green flower-leaves. He

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was not lost, however, and he never forgot that we were there; the extreme courtesy of his voice made us feel that there was nothing in all the world he would rather do than sit and talk to us.

Suddenly he ceased gazing into the wood and turned to Irene and remarked, reflecting:

'Anemones and foxes,' repeating the words two or three times. 'Anemones and foxes, anemones and foxes.' Finally he put out his hand towards the anemones and said: 'Excuse me; may I take one?'

His hand faltered weakly among the bunch and a few anemones were loosened and some fell to the ground. I bent down at once but he was already stooping and saying 'I insist, I insist.' His body was as dry and stiff as old leather. He picked up the anemones one by one, breathing with little distressful gasps and bending as though his joints had been locked together. At last he straightened himself with the anemones quivering in his fingers. His face was colourless, and his eyes were moist with tears of exhaustion, which began to creep down his cheeks like drops of thin oil. His breath was dry and dead, and he sat for a long time with his hands resting heavily on the gun across his knees, with the bluish, sagging lids of his eyes closed, his whole frame struggling to be calm again.

Finally he opened his eyes and made a gesture of beautiful, tired courtesy towards Irene and said:

'You must forgive me.'

She smiled. He smiled also, and then as though it were simply the natural excuse for his clumsiness he said quietly:

'I'm afraid I'm dying. Damn it.'

He spoke as though he bitterly hated the thought of dying, and there was a kind of defiant life in his words. I did not look at him. I sat looking instead at the gun lying across his knees; it resembled him—old, worn, polished, aristocratic, and I wondered why he had brought it up there, out

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of season, with the wood full of mating birds and animals and their young.

He saw me looking at the gun. He glanced at me for a second and his bright eyes seemed to take in all my thoughts.

'You are wondering what makes me carry a gun in spring,' he said. He looked slightly ashamed of himself, as though he were a boy and we suspected him of hiding eggs in his cap.

'I wanted a shot,' he confessed. 'I've been a sportsman all my life. You know how it is—something you've always done—can't leave it alone. I had to come up. I've been in bed for a God-forsaken month. I had a room overlooking the orchard, and they let me sit up in bed and shoot sparrows through the open window with an air-gun. I used to wait until they settled on the plum bloom. Kill about a bird a day if I was lucky. I got bored to death. I like the open country and something worth shooting, like snipe, you understand.' He turned his head and looked at us in turn. There was a gay light in his eyes—that light which always comes into the eyes of old men when they talk to children. 'I dare say you think it's wrong to shoot,' he asked. 'What's wrong in it? All sentimentality—nonsense, a great deal of nonsense. It's only a law—the strong preying on the weak. Yes, it's nonsense—a lot of talk by people who probably wouldn't know a tit from a hawk, and who wouldn't care if they did. Life won't stop because I shoot a pigeon.'

He broke off, a little exhausted by talking, and leaned back his head against the wall of the hut, and let his gaze rest again on the bright green wood and the flakes of trembling sunlight. It was warm and sheltered in the hut, and the breeze came in at the doorway full of the sweetness of the wood *breaking into life again*.

There was a silence. I looked over towards the fox-holes; the mound was still deserted. I heard a sigh. And suddenly, out of his meditation, the old man was saying:

'When I look at this wood I have immortal longings in me.'

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A moment later he went on, muttering to himself, as though he had forgotten we were there:

'The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch which hurts and is desired.'

He broke off and lifted his hand from the stock of his gun and said with a tremor of excitement in his voice:

'I used to know it all. A long time ago—sixty years ago. A young girl I knew was Cleopatra. I didn't act, but I knew the part. I used to shut myself up and learn it.'

A young fox suddenly trotted over the mound, sniffing among the elder bushes, and I watched him until he disappeared by the pool. The old man went on talking again, telling us of the girl who had taken the part of Cleopatra. He talked of her gently and meditatively, half to himself, sometimes quite absently, and then a little shyly when he recalled suddenly that we were there. She had been a dark, brilliant, capricious creature, with all the eager, passionate, irresponsible gaiety of a young girl just opening her eyes to life. He talked of her for a long time, breaking off, forgetting, meditating—his voice by turns dreamy and tremulous with the effort of remembrance; sometimes he repeated a line or two of a speech, and sometimes he moved his hands and tried to describe to us how beautifully she had acted. There were things he remembered perfectly, such as a yellow silk dress she had worn, a certain way in which she would stand and click her fingers when angry or perplexed; a winter afternoon when he had stood on his head in the snow again and again, just in order to amuse her. He had forgotten how long the play had run, but at the end of it they had run away to the Continent together. There had been days of sweet, hectic happiness. He spoke of her always as Cleopatra, as though too shy to mention her name, and he went on for a long time unfolding his tale, losing the thread and picking it up again uncertainly, until it was like some old picture, sewn in silk, of another century.

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His voice trailed off at last; he traced over the pattern of the gun-breech with his long, bony forefinger. The girl was dead; he did not want to talk of her again. We sat silent, listening to the silence of the wood broken now and then by the crack of a twig, a blackbird singing, the soft, halting coo of a pigeon—almost a summer sound.

The old man sat sunk in meditation, his chin dropping towards the anemone he had threaded in his buttonhole. He suddenly looked older than ever, an immemorial figure overburdened by the weight of a thousand years, the wrinkles of his face eternal. Suddenly he turned and looked at me wonderfully, his blue eyes alert and twinkling, as though his whole being had come to life in them.

'You find it difficult to believe I was once a young man?' he said.

I had been trying to make myself believe. Before I could answer he said:

'An old man looks permanent—inevitable—as though he had been born an old man, isn't that it?'

'I think that's it.'

'Are you glad you are not old?'

'Yes.'

'You'd like to remain young? No? You want to go on growing, but whatever happens you want to keep life, don't you? I know, I know. One of these days I shall snap in half like a damn' twig, but I still want life. I'd like time for another shot or two. I want to hang on a bit longer—a bit longer. It's nice to think of summer coming on. I see the oaks are breaking bud. I've great faith in that. But I haven't heard the cuckoo yet, have you? It seems late this year.'

He went on talking again, talking of the past, his youth, his shooting days—a time when he had shot a hundred snipe; he had been a gay bird; he had lived joyously and he wanted to go on living; he knew that he was dying and he hated the thought of death. He made long pauses and rested and

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breathed carefully as he spoke, as though trying to sustain the life in him a little longer. A young fox came over the mound and trotted away in the shadow and sunlight under the trees; he saw it and pointed it out with his thin white forefinger, and we watched it vanish by the pool.

'I should like as many more years to live as foxes I've helped to kill,' he said. 'You're young. I envy you.'

He talked a little longer; he seemed to grow tired, and presently we rose to go. He rose also. He stood amazingly straight and tall, only bending his head a little, like a great hollyhock. He shook hands, holding our hands in his bone-cold fingers for a long time.

'It has been a great pleasure,' he said.

'It has been charming,' I said. 'I hope you will get a shot.'

'Thank you. I shall probably miss in any case.'

We said good-bye.

'Good-bye.' He gave us a slight bow, leaning on his gun. He smiled at Irene with his wonderful entrancingly bright eyes, full of gallantry and life. Finally, just as we were going, he said:

'I hope you don't mind if I say something to you—a little advice. If you wish to do anything, do it. Do what you feel you must do. Don't listen to other people. You're young. Let them go to the devil. It's your life, not their's. If I had listened to other people I shouldn't be up here this afternoon. I should be in bed. Good-bye.'

He took off his hat; his thin, silver-yellow hair shone beautifully; he came to the doorway of the hut to watch us depart. We walked down the riding, and once we turned and saw him still standing there, still hatless, but when we turned a second time he had vanished into the hut again. We said a few words about him, and I thought again of his intense blue eyes, his perfect courtesy, the story of the girl who had been Cleopatra, the way he had learned her lines by heart,

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and the way he still longed for summer to come. I thought of him lying in bed and shooting sparrows through the open window, and of how he could not bear to lie there and had dragged himself up into the wood for another shot before he died.

We struck away from the riding and walked diagonally through the wood along a narrow path. We came upon the shell of a sucked blackbird's egg, and Irene picked it up and walked with it in her hand, admiring its colours.

There was suddenly the report of a shot in the wood. We stopped. The shot went racing through the trees and rattled the air. A blackbird screamed, and we heard the rabbits scuttling away to hiding, rustling the dry leaves. The shot spent itself at last and the wood was calm with a silence that was like death.

We listened for the sound of the second barrel, but it never came. We walked on again and came out of the wood, and crossing a field of young wheat we heard the cuckoo calling for the first time that spring.

I wondered if the old man had heard it too and how often he would hear it again.

THE HOLIDAY

DRAWING away his eyes from the window of the guard's van he suddenly ceased his counting of the telegraph poles, flashing up, down and past, an occupation which had kept him silent for many miles, and turning his back to the window brought his hands together over his knees in a soft clap-clap! and his bright eyes to rest on the bundle of whiteness lying in the arms of the girl at his side. Then he smiled a little and whispered:

'Is he asleep still?'

The girl nodded her head cautiously as if she too had been nearly asleep and had answered thus for fear of disturbing herself. But her dark eyes were wide open, every moment making swift excursions from the baby to her husband, seated like herself on an iron trunk near the window. They were eyes whose lashes seemed incapable of ever drooping, and in which lay always a strong light, mirroring clearly the panorama of passing landscape, rained upon ceaselessly until the colour of dull steel.

There too were the reflections of the other occupants of the van, sitting and standing about her in dejected attitudes, watching the rain, eating, mournfully playing cards and talking in low whispers, as if sound were forbidden.

She did not talk. Occasionally without opening her lips she made quiet sounds into the face of her baby, and then hid her own in the soft hollow made by the child against her breast. Once or twice the little thing stirred, and for a moment she held her breath in fear before letting it escape her with a faint hiss that was her only sign of relief.

The train went on. The frosty look of the rain on the windows began to hide the moors and hills outside.

The girl continued to follow her husband's restless movements with her wide eyes. He, for his part, moved about in the limited space between the piles of luggage, peered

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through the windows and watched the card-players without taking a hand. In the grey light he looked startlingly young. Now and then he spoke to her in soft tones, which she acknowledged by simple gestures and stares, but more often, as if awed by her constant quietness, he merely moved his lips and smiled.

'Awake yet?' he would convey to her.

At this she would move the child enough to reveal its white face quiet with sleep. Thus satisfied he would turn away with an air of resignation and perform again all his old tricks for killing time with all the old interest, as if they had been new to him.

'York soon,' he once told her. 'Change there, I expect.'

She jerked up her head, showed signs of fear and spoke for the first time. Her voice was high-pitched, not unmusical and clear.

'Change?' she repeated.

He turned to a man at his side and asked:

'Change at York, do we?'

The other replied moodily: 'Yes.'

He faced the girl. 'Yes, change,' he said.

The next moment, seeing her fear heighten he touched one of her hands and tried to calm her. 'He won't get wet,' he urged. 'It's covered in there. It's safe enough.'

Leaning to get a glimpse of the outside world he said desperately: 'It doesn't rain half like it did.' When she appeared unimpressed by this he declared with a smile: 'Not like that day at Scarborough. Remember that? Didn't it come? Well, not half like that, not a quarter.'

He was abruptly silent again at her request and, listening to the scream and growl of the wheels and the metallic patter of the rain overhead, thought: 'We shan't be long now, we shan't be long.' Nevertheless he yawned, stretched his cramped body and knew that there were still many hours to go.

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Through a hole in the misty surface of the window he caught sight of great purple lakes of heather. He turned to direct the girl's attention there but stopped, his gaze arrested by his son, pulling silently at one of her small, girlish, uncovered breasts. His heart jumped, his hands became clasped over his knees, and his knees, and his whole body took up an attitude of expectancy, as if awaiting a miracle, following every movement which passed before him.

Thus, no longer heeding the motion of the train and the murmurs about them, the couple took in this sight, one with a tender stare and the other with her dark, bare head drooped over her breast.

Before they were aware of it, and with the scene still unfinished, the train reached York. There they were unready for the rush which bore them out to the platform. In the crowd the girl was distraught, while the man struggled desperately, trying to protect her as he hauled the tin trunk. The child cried with hunger.

Before long they drifted into an oasis formed by piles of luggage. There it was quieter, and as the woman sat down to feed the child again the man elbowed his way to the coffee-stall and there, whenever half an opportunity arose, croaked to the attendant: 'Cup of tea, please.'

When he steered his way out again he was smiling faintly. He motioned the girl to drink. As she obeyed carefully he produced from his pocket a slab of cake and whispered: 'I pinched this. Eat it, go on, eat it.' He grinned again.

She looked up at him. The tea steamed about her white throat and clung in tiny amber-coloured beads to her upper lip. She shook her head vehemently, gave him the cup and held the saucer while he drank. So it went on until the cup was emptied and he took her arm to guide her firmly away.

The train ran in, to be besieged like a corpse by vermin. From end to end of it the girl and the man ran despairingly, struggling with the baby and the tin trunk. Into every

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compartment they darted besecching glances. Finally they came to the halt at the guard's van, already crowded to the windows, and after more struggling the woman was able to climb in a moment before the guard signalled and followed her. The man protested desperately, then with a flash of stoicism stood perfectly still and called:

'Wait for me at the junction!'

He waved once while watching her white face diminish. After that a sense of loss seemed to strike him in the throat.

Back in the crowd, thicker and noisier, he roamed about, lonely and unhappy, until he came again to the oasis where they had drunk tea. There he sat down near the empty cup, tried to be patient under the delay, but fretted ceaselessly about the woman and the child.

The rain kept on, hissing constantly and prolonging the desolate spectacle of a railway station on a wet day. To the noise of its steadfast downpour the man watched trains and people coming and going without rest. When a flaming poster labelled *Scarborough* caught his attention he remembered that only that morning he had been there, and that already it seemed a thousand years away.

After that his eyes were constantly resting on the violent colours of the advertisement, and he remembered vividly the green sea, the windy evenings and warm days of the week that had passed. Many times he asked himself: why should it ever end, where was the justice of it?

The rain and the engines hissed out the afternoon.

In the train he stared from the misty windows and thought of his wife as the grey fields slid past. Already he was weary and, as the train surged on, he grew hungry too. The pain of it would catch him suddenly below the ribs and pass with a dull ache that seemed to scoop out a chasm in his stomach. Soon he pressed his knees against his body.

Thus it was that his hand came into contact with something soft, studded with a few coins. With the ravenousness

THE HOLIDAY

of an animal he began to eat the forgotten cake. As he tasted it his eyes became bright as if a raindrop had been imprisoned in each, and he was seized with a strange headiness like that of intoxication. He half-choked when the dry crumbs harrowed his throat.

Suddenly he paused in the act of eating and drew from his pocket two railway tickets and stared stupidly at them, motionless as an idol. To his lips still clung a few crumbs, which moved only when he began to think again.

His thoughts were of the girl. He saw her questioned, frightened and detained, and the railway officials unkind and impatient when she could not produce her ticket. He began to sweat with worry and call himself a fool over and over again.

The growl of brakes came like a clarion to him. He ran from the train as if it had been a contaminated prison and so down the platform towards the still, candescent spot he saw there.

A dozen questions ran from his lips as he came to the girl. When he walked away with her his clutch on her arm was fierce and devoted as hers on the child. The rain falling from the same monotone of sky as ever but he did not heed, and no longer felt afraid about the business of the tickets he related some of the things that had happened to him.

When they sat in the train again she fingered his brow coolly and said: 'Your head's all sweat.' He grinned carelessly, but with the touch of her handkerchief on his face looked strangely into her eyes. Soon they began to talk of home in whispers.

That night, though dog-tired, he could not sleep and lay staring at the ceiling, thinking. At his side slept the girl and the child, breathing with a soft sound like that of the sea in the distance. Hour after hour he heard this regular rise and fall until in the end he surrendered to its delusion and lived again the joys of the week that had passed. Soon he made no

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attempt to sleep, but lay on his back, staring in profound thought about it all.

Gradually the noise of the traffic died in the distance, leaving over the streets a tired hush which crept into the room too. The rain had ceased, and in the clear darkness he forgot that it had ever been. The weariness and strain of the journey slipped away too, and he began to know no regret or worry but only a dull longing, resembling an ache, the longing for the sea again, the warm, dark nights, and the low noise of the waves over the murmur of the crowd.

And again and again he would ask himself: 'Will it ever come again?' and then in that strange, tired silence, lie awake and wonder.

HARVEST

ON most evenings between April and September she had chosen this walk for her children, choosing it because from the top of the lane the colours of the surrounding land, from the time of fresh greens and yellows to the time of harvest, were soft and pleasant to her eyes.

This evening, as on all others, she rested her arms on the gate while regaining her breath after the journey. It was later than usual, though not yet dusk, and sultrily warm with the true oppressiveness of autumn. The air was so still that she fancied now and then she could hear the rustle of her children's feet in the grass in the adjoining field. Even if they had never spoken, had never occasionally called to her 'Mother! Mother! here we are!' she would have been aware of their presence because of this sound, heavy and swishing, like the sea.

In the middle of the summer she had often played with the children in this field. It had not seemed childish or beneath her dignity to lie in the grass and let them hide their faces in her skirts, then scream in her ears and half-suffocate her with hay. She had never been able to reproach them for these things, had never been able to look into any one of their young smiling faces and utter an angry word. She remembered this had been so from the very spring of the year, through the time of daisies, celandines, buttercups and hay, thyme and clover. She remembered looking forward with a naïve eagerness, as if she had been a child herself, to this time, each day, of irresponsible joys, of absurd laughter. Sometimes, on the journey back again, she remembered, she had shut her eyes and simply followed the voices before her in her great joy.

They had not once failed to refresh her in spirit. Now, for some days, for a reason she dare not let intrude upon her too often, she had not played with them. Not understanding this the children had showered uneasy questions upon her.

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'But why? why won't you come? Mother! Mother!—come now!'

But each time, with a heaviness of her heart, she had refused them without ever giving her reason.

These refusals and the emptiness they made in her daily life, hurt her deeply. This evening, more than all others, she felt the lack of their companionship, their soft voices, their faces hiding in her skirts. They had come to gather mushrooms. They had talked excitedly about it since morning. To miss such a simple thing as this and to feel sad about it seemed absurd, she knew, yet she was disappointed and depressed by it, without being able to explain, even to understand why.

From the gate her eyes roamed over the field where the children were. Their four little figures wandered tirelessly among the grass, searching diligently. Behind them, and on all sides, extended cornfields, sloping like the sides of a golden frame, enclosing it securely there as a painting worth much to her.

On these slopes she could see figures too. Now and then reached her the sound of a reaper working very late, and the low rumble of wagons up and down the hill. The sounds came through the air heavily, as if of another world. Sometimes, as with the dark, still trees above her, it seemed that the wagons and the reaper laboured under a great burden, too heavy for them, which made them groan.

It began to grow twilight. Across the field one of the children came running to her.

'The basket, Mother—please—quickly! We've found something!'

He ran off again, hugging the basket to his breast. It was too big for him.

'Don't be long—come back soon, remember—soon!' she called after him.

He did not answer. It seemed to her most likely he had

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not even heard her. It was foolish—but she had not the heart to call him again.

She slipped back into a mood of reflection when he had gone. Now, as the twilight took a stronger possession of the trees, of the distant slopes and of the sky, where there would soon be stars, she began to think more and more of the reason why now she never played with her children. She hugged herself for a long time silently, with closed eyes. This reason hurt her even to think about—it seemed so cruel, so unfair, imposing upon her so much.

For a moment she had a fleeting illusion that it did not exist. She opened her eyes and looked up. This illusion became suddenly replaced by a second: it seemed to her that there was another child in the field with the rest. She counted them feverishly: in her haste she counted five, then only four, then five again.

Suddenly it was immaterial to her whether there were four or five. The presence of this fifth one, a presence that had been for so long like a shadow, a burden, and a blessing by turns, was no longer part of an illusion. In a week or two she knew that the other children would be saying among themselves, with simple, incredulous delight: 'We have a little baby!' She saw them being led into her bedroom to peer at it against her breast.

In a day or two she would no longer be able to bring the children up the lane in the evening. Before long she would be forced to move about quietly, to live through a horror of expectation, an oppression of fears, to deny herself, yet to appear calm and fearless, as if nothing were about to happen. She knew this with an unclouded understanding. For her it was an experience not to be dreaded because unprecedented, because unknown, but for the simple reason that it had happened to her before. She was aware so certainly what fears it brought, what remembrances, what agony, even the sounds, the silences—

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every detail, even the odours, even the attention of the nurse to her bodily needs.

Sometimes the thing more awful than all these, the inevitability of it all, made her cold with fear. It would be as if the night dew had fallen with unnatural heaviness on her alone, so that she felt cold in a world of sultry airs, of luxurious scents, of warm fruits and leaves. It became so that she was never deceived—that there were no illusions of miraculous escape from this new presence.

Dusk began to cover everything, like an oppressive, luxuriant bloom. The trees weighed down heavily beneath it, the grasses shone dimly with wetness. From a great distance came the sound of the wagons rumbling uphill. The reaper had ceased. Clouds with a dim amber light behind them had risen from beyond the hill, and in a little while the moon would be up.

She was very quiet. Suddenly she recalled some words spoken to her long ago.

‘My little one, I promise you—no burdens, no troubles—only happiness.’

She remembered also the speaker’s face with the same clearness. It seemed that if she had said in return, ‘I promise you, I will keep a perfect image of you,’ she could not have been more faithful. Now it seemed to her changed: in those days it had been not merely a face but the embodiment of all her tenderest, most feminine ideals. She remembered not only this circumstance, but others when she had believed just so utterly in her husband’s kindness, his trust, his magnanimity, and when she had even, in this rapturous faith, invented for him fresh and more wonderful virtues.

Now this was so no longer: she thought of him now as her husband, a being from whom she no longer expected promises and assurances.

Dusk kept falling about her, the trees hung like dark curtains against the sky. The heart of the evening gave up

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its sounds: the cries of her children, the rumble of wagons, sometimes the stir of leaves and the late voice of a grass-hopper.

She began to whisper to herself, 'No burdens, no troubles.'

She got no further. It seemed to her suddenly that both this thought and the promise which had given rise to it were futile and unnatural. Not all these wishes, she thought, could upset the inevitability of what was about to happen to her. Dreamily, as if she had begun to wander in her mind, she thought of the orchards she had passed in the lane, the damson-trees, the apples, the long ropes of pears, the plums she had seen in the grass.

The weight of these on the uncomplaining arms of the trees made her think slowly, 'It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter.'

What was it that didn't matter? she asked herself. She did not know. She bent her head on the gate.

Then, knowing how late it was, she aroused herself. The dusk had grown heavier and heavier. An orange light pervaded the east: minute by minute there were more stars.

She raised her voice and called her children. She thought that on no other night had they stayed so long.

'It's late!—quickly, quickly!'

Their indistinct figures seemed to move with deliberate slowness across the darkened field. She remembered suddenly the things she must do before bedtime: little George had torn his shirt, a button had come off Edith's chemise. She must see that each of the children washed themselves and ate something and went to bed.

Out of the gloom, with the ominous glow from the east spreading through it, she saw them coming slowly. She called half-frantically:

'Quickly! Quickly! Where have you been?'

The excitement caused a pain in her side. For a moment she held herself quite still, watching the children advance

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just as before. She felt weak. Everything about her seemed heavy and still, a world unexpectedly overburdened with its own luxuriance and fruitfulness.

Suddenly the children paused not far off. Something showed white on the ground between them. It was the basket, she thought.

'It's too heavy!' they called to her. 'It's full—we can't carry it!'

She hurried to them and lifted the basket with its burden of wild apples, blackberries and mushrooms. The children seized her skirts, her free hand and the handle of the basket.

'You carry it, Mother!'

Their voices fell loudly into the world of autumnal softness and gloom, disturbing echoes that ran from the heavy trees to the cornfields afar off. 'You carry it, Mother, you carry it!'

CHARLOTTE ESMOND

I

ESMOND's, the cooked-meat shop, stood in a narrow street exactly opposite the back doors of an old variety theatre. In contrast to the drab walls pasted over with violent pictures of acrobats flying into the arms of operatic ladies, and of jugglers tossing green and yellow bottles over the heads of ravishing pink dancers, and still more in contrast to the performers themselves, who arrived with a rather cosmopolitan and dowdy air along with their faded properties on Sundays and Thursdays, Esmond's was prim, white and respectable.

The first performance at the theatre ended at half past eight every evening. A few minutes before this a little woman would come into Esmond's from the room behind and carefully light the extra gas-lamp hanging over the white marble counter. She usually had on a neat white pinafore painted with little crimson rose-like buds and flowers. She was quick, dark-eyed and turning grey. There was an air of nervousness and prudence about the way in which she always surveyed for a moment the array of sausages, pies, smoked hams, polonies, blood-puddings and joints of stuffed pork displayed in the window. From her pensive and melancholy eyes she looked like a woman to whom suffering came readily, but always as something to be repressed and borne in silence. Long civility and servitude had left her face still delicate and gentle; there was a certain ladylike manner about her that made her lips appear for ever half-smiling. After this one glance at her meats and pies and another into the street, she would dart away. A moment or two later a red-and-gold commissioner would appear and fling back the doors of the theatre, and Charlotte Esmond would return carrying a hot grid of frizzling sausages, filling the shop with their savoury odour just in time to meet the first customers trooping in from the theatre.

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Each night, for many years, as soon as the variety performance was over, the poor of the district had besieged Esmond's for hot sausages. Struggling, talking, coughing, rubbing their hands, they pressed against the counter and exchanged remarks with Mrs. Esmond as she served them. And Mrs. Esmond, although she resented their poverty, and dreamed of a shop in a residential quarter with appropriate delicacies in her window, had known them for so long that their lives seemed subtly entwined with her own.

As she served them the smile on her face never lessened or went away. Soon, as the opportunity arose, she asked a question.

'Well, and what was it like at the theatre to-night?' she would say.

Her voice was soft and refined, but it lacked familiarity, and the remark was only a habit of years.

'Oh! it was passable,' they would say. 'The conjurer was the best. Very smart. But the singing—well, I've heard some singing; a cat could sing better. But the conjurer was tip-top.'

She would nod in silence. Something in her honest religious soul mistrusted conjurers.

'Wasn't there a juggler?' she would say.

Jugglers appealed to her. One could see all they were doing, one knew that their art was pure and straightforward. Unlike conjurers, they had no deceptions.

'No, there wasn't a juggler.'

'Oh!' she would say.

And then she would withdraw, like a snail to its shell, and wrap up sausages with courteous dexterity and say no more.

Secretly she was very fond of the theatre, though she had never been since her husband's death. The theatre appealed to her by its tradition, by its interpretation of life, and again because of its rarefied atmosphere, its gaudy colours and

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romantic words. It seemed always a little finer and higher than life. In the same way she was fond of the church. But now she never went either to the theatre or to church. During the week she worked too hard, and on Sundays she woke so tired out that she could hardly dress herself, and she was tired all day, too tired even to put on her best clothes and take a walk somewhere.

Saturday was a long day. Besides sausages she cooked a few special things such as savoury faggots and salted beef, which were set steaming in the window, and her work began much earlier and went on much later. As the hot spicy steam filled the shop and the crowd of customers thickened, her brow would become clammy and at last she would pause for a moment, wipe the sweat away, and gaze over the staring faces of her customers and apologise:

'Excuse me,' she would say. 'I shall just have to call Effie to come and help me.'

And fluttering quickly to the back of the shop she would draw aside the curtain of slatted green cane over the doorway and call:

'Effie! Effie! I shall be wanting you.'

Sometimes there would be no answer; more often a voice would merely repeat in languid and resentful tones:

'Wanting me? Shall you? What for?'

That was all. Charlotte would return to the counter, recommend the steaming beef again, wrap up her black puddings, count out her sausages and answer remarks without ever letting the smile on her face relax or become dull. No Effie would appear however, and at last Charlotte would lay down her knife and call again:

'Effie! Effie! Can't you come?'

'Perhaps she's 'aving a bath,' some wit would say.

Charlotte would try to quell the laughter.

'Please don't laugh—it encourages her—she'll never come if you laugh.'

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And she would try something between insistence and cajolery:

'Effie dear, do try and come!'

At last, after more entreaties, a white shape, rather characterless and expansive and languid, would move backwards and forwards in the dim light behind the screen; and presently, like a fat white cloud drifting slowly into view, Effie would appear.

After a disdainful look or two at her mother and the customers, the girl would sidle up to the counter and begin to serve. Her manner of serving was to jerk up her head with something between pride and hostility, as if mortally insulted, in the direction of the nearest customer, and then turn languidly away to cut beef or ham or spoon up hot faggots—neither the fixed hostility of her glance nor her patronising silence ever broken. As she moved stiffly to and fro, she resembled some big, fair-haired doll made of pink-and-white china. There was something also about her large blue eyes that was hard and cold; all the hypersensitive superiority of her being was centred there. At times they seemed also to fill with shame, the horrid, demeaning shame with which she felt the work in that shop covered her. She hated it, she shrank from it, she was too good for it. And she would use her fingers daintily, like a lady, keeping the customers waiting and handing over the food at last as if it were contaminated.

Charlotte Esmond was puzzled and unhappy about her daughter. As a child the girl had been plump and pretty, but as soon as her childhood was past she developed with alarming rapidity and became stout and strangely indolent. Her face was puffy and white; her bust was like a pillow. Pretty dresses and vivid colours did not suit her. She rarely walked out. People laughed at her. Hadn't she even seen them laughing in the shop? And she hated them for it, protecting herself with a cold reserve which seemed to them only a sort of insolent pride.

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A little reasoning from Charlotte made her weep at once. The mother took the problem of the girl about with her, troubled continually. Sons found their way out into the world and were a blessing, she thought, even in absence. But she felt that Effie would never find her way.

On the other hand, Effie herself was constantly reading and dreaming of her future, poring alternately over cheap novels and the works of Scott.

The room behind the shop was large but dark. Its one window looked on a narrow yard, in which stood an old outhouse with broken windows. A frail rhododendron bush had tried for many years to flourish in a green tub set on an iron tank, but flowers had never come, and the plant seemed to make no fresh leaves and would have been better dead. But Effie still hoped for its blossoms, just as she hoped for romance as she reclined on the rickety American-leather sofa under the window and watched it.

Nothing approaching love had ever touched her. Her thoughts of love were naïve, chaste, beautiful. Perfection, to her, lay in someone who would overlook her stoutness and idolise her and hurry her away from the shop and the eternal odour of steaming meat and the people who laughed there. Where such a person was she did not know, and could not imagine; but the dreamy pursuit of this elusive figure kept her from dejection.

II

Charlotte had also three sons. They were big, ambitious, industrious fellows, and they resembled their father at the age when he had wooed her with a slow, persistent love which had at length induced her to leave the milliner's where she was apprenticed and start in a cooked-meat business with him. They had grown up with a loathing for their father's business. She was not sorry. She knew they were really fitted by their persistence and cleverness for

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something better, and secretly she had encouraged the experiments in chemistry and mechanical things which as boys they had conducted in the outhouse in the yard. They must be great, better, different, she was always thinking. She was almost pitifully ambitious for them. Once a week she found them a little money for experiments. She taught them a revulsion for the cheap meat they sold and the neighbourhood in which they lived. And when they decided to emigrate it was she who encouraged them, found the money, and wept over them. They were now in America, quite successful, sending her a letter and a little money from time to time, and the two youngest were about to be married.

She missed the mere masculine presence of them deeply. From a practical point of view there was need for a man in the shop. Effie did little but think and read and wait, and was short of breath and had fainting fits over the pastry-board if she worked too hard. Charlotte vaguely thought of employing a man. But she wanted an honest, trustworthy man, a juggler not a conjurer.

She knew of no one. She had few friends. Work had given her little leisure, and the shop tied her, body and soul. She was too proud to entertain in their one dark room, with its broken sofa and eternal reek of cooking meats and spices, and its view over the dismal yard and the factory chimneys blacking out half the sky beyond. She was also inclined to be resigned, almost fatalistic, about her lot. If God had placed her there, she must remain; when it was time to change or move or die no doubt God would say so; and whatever was to happen, would happen. One knew no more.

Once a week, however, they received a visit from an old acquaintance. In the old days he had come in a pony-trap; now he owned a small green two-seater. As soon as they heard the horn, they knew who was coming and sat up.

‘Victor Henryson!’

Charlotte would wipe her greasy or floury hands on her

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apron, Effie would untie the strings, the bell would ring, and Charlotte would flutter into the shop to chat with their old friend the credit-draper.

He always greeted her with a suave and rather mocking bow which was the key to her faint distrust of him. He was a little man, plump and dapper, with a smart chestnut moustache and a keen fresh red complexion. He dressed in dark blue suits thinly striped with grey, with a little blue-and-white spotted handkerchief, which added the last touch to his slightly affected person, always peeping loosely from his breast. He was almost her own age, but he had kept himself fresh and youthful. For Charlotte however there had always been something oily and over-affable about him, and she mistrusted the way he always greeted her:

‘Well, and how is the world using our little milliner?’

To her annoyance she was always the little milliner to him. He had known her first as an apprentice, but she detected something mocking in the remembrance. And she would reply coolly:

‘Well, I am still here.’

‘Oh! Don’t be dismal,’ he would say. ‘Surely we can do something for you? Surely there’s a little piece of something that would gladden your heart? Some new bird-feather trimmings, now? Don’t say “No.” I can tell you’re aching to see them.’

‘No really, really——’

He would run to the car and return laden with boxes. She would still protest. She had no money. He was also a great gossip; she would never be rid of him.

But as soon as her eyes alighted on the feathers, green, white, purple, gold, black and scarlet, the shop would seem gayer, and she would begin to turn them over, timidly at first, but rapidly with excitement, smoothing and brushing them with her finger-tips, even sniffing them and pressing them to her pale cheeks. Memories of her girlhood and

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youth would overcome her, the bright-coloured feathers would seem to be the very symbols of past happiness mingled with unrealised and half-forgotten things, and at last she would succumb.

'You know,' she would say, half playfully, as she found her purse and gave him the money, 'you want shooting.'

'Oh! be honest—is it I, or the feathers?'

'Oh! go along with you!'

'But is it now?'

'Why you, of course—you'd turn the head of a stone statue.'

It was this persuasiveness which she mistrusted and disliked, but which she found irresistible, the power to make her talk for an hour when the pies were waiting, or to buy a piece of primrose chiffon or an emerald feather which she knew she would never use. Each time she bought something from him she bought unwillingly, against her own judgment and her own heart, and yet she liked talking to him, however grudgingly she did it and however foolish and unprofitable she knew it to be. She envied him for having kept his youth while she had lost hers. She was faintly jealous of the air of gentility he had been able to preserve. Her own had so long ago been crushed and dissipated.

Invariably when she talked to him the problem of Effie came up. Effie was becoming the bane of life, utterly incompetent and thankless, more and more a creature of indolence and stubborn pride.

'I don't know,' Charlotte would say to him, 'what is the matter with her? Can you tell? She just sits still, and yet she's dissatisfied. She's discontented with everything. She wants something. I know that—I know she wants something. But what? If I ask her she won't answer.'

'What if she shouldn't know?' he asked.

'How—how can that be? I always knew what I wanted.'

'Perhaps Effie is different.'

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'Do you understand her then?'

'Effie is different—that's all I understand.'

'Yes, but what's to be done?'

'Let her dream,' he would say. 'She must have her dreams.'

'But can't you find her something to do?' she would cry. 'If only you pay her enough for her train-fare each day and her dinner—she doesn't eat much—it will be something. She will have started. You see? She will have started.'

But the draper and his wife managed everything between themselves, and there was no chance of an opening for Effie. He could only occasionally bring her a pillow-slip of oddments, faulty silk stockings, underclothes, lengths of cheap lace and flowered prints and braids, on which she could make a little profit when she resold them to women in the shop.

And this he did. The lots of oddments went easily. Effie seemed to like the idea; and Charlotte was delighted. Charlotte with her experience decided the prices and Effie took the whole profits, and the next bag of oddments became a great event.

That springtime, however, he ceased suddenly to call on them. They were mystified and hurt, and wondered how it could be. With the weekly oddments no longer interesting her, Effie became lower in spirits, and did nothing again but dream and wait. Charlotte felt bitterly towards Henryson, as if he had cheated them.

Effie decided at last to go to his shop in the next town and see him. She returned with a peculiar, far-away, chastened look on her face. She was to say that he lacked all heart to come and see them. He would come soon. But now he could not face them. His wife had died. Effie was strangely touched, and without knowing if it were for Henryson or his wife, she cried in the train, full of pity, and again when she told the news to her mother.

Charlotte's pity was of a dumb, oppressive kind, but,

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unlike Effie, she knew whom she pitied. She became aware of a searching compassion for Henryson, and could not turn her thoughts away from him. She wanted to express her feelings for him, but he still never came to see them, and after some weeks she wrote him a letter.

Soon after this letter he came. He was dressed in black and hardly seemed as plump as before and was content rather to be spoken to than speak. He had not been crushed. Death had only cheated him, taking him unawares; it had not tortured and revolutionised him with its pain. Beneath his moody seriousness, like his body beneath his black clothes, he remained the same.

Nevertheless Charlotte was filled with tenderness for him. When she looked at his black-clothed figure, so sober and unnatural, and noticed the same blue-and-white spotted handkerchief peeping as of old from his breast, she was sorry and wanted to weep for him.

He came a second time and she invited him to have tea with them, and it made her heart lighter to see him eating and to hear him talk to Effie. She felt that he had changed. His jauntiness was absent; his eyes were no longer mocking, and she never saw one glimpse of the oily persuasiveness she so mistrusted and disliked.

He lingered until darkness, until the shop was lighted, and only went reluctantly. When the shop was closed Effie brought out a beautiful length of dark reddish velvet he had given her, soft and luxurious and with a bloom on its face like a ripening plum. Charlotte was dazzled. She held it up, draped it into folds, spread it out like a beautiful shadow. 'And he's given it to you? Given it you?' she could only ask, astounded.

The girl nodded and clasped the velvet in her hands. Charlotte was brought to a decision about him.

'He's so nice—so much nicer,' she said. 'He used to be so superior, and he always talked so boastingly and mockingly.

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But you know he's changed. He's quieter, more sincere, quite different.'

The girl did not answer, but crushed the velvet against her bosom before putting it away.

III

Spring came. The rhododendron began to show cones of pale green among its blackened leaves, and Charlotte and Effie began to hope for flowers. The draper came one afternoon and spent a long time putting fresh soil in the tub. He explained to them that it was wood soil, the dark loam of hundreds of years, which he had stopped to gather from the woods as he drove over to see them. The woods were in full garland, decked out with primroses and hyacinths and windflowers and the shy white wood-violets that gave themselves away by their very sweetness. He had come to ask if they would drive out and gather flowers with him.

The shop was shut at noon on the following day. Charlotte had not been for a drive for years, since the early days of the motor-car, and she wrapped herself up in many scarves and an old veil. Her excitement was almost childish, but Effie was ready quickly, strangely tranquil with a kind of becalming certitude about her.

The day was brilliant with spring blue and sunniness. They bowled along rapidly out of the town, Charlotte sitting silent and transfixed beside the draper. She half forgot Effie in watching the green country unfolding and in looking for primroses in the open spaces between the birch trees. In her happiness she had already begun to attach importance to things the draper said to her, to odd moments when he had talked about the loneliness of his life and his need for companionship. When she thought of him the old need for a masculine presence about her was aroused again. They drove on, mile after mile, into deeper woodland. She could see the bluebells running like a light blue flame

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over the dark earth. Where she had once distrusted him, she found it impossible to repeat his name without pleasure. Why was that? Wasn't she too old for such thoughts, wasn't it silly, wasn't it an illusion, wasn't it false? By and by the car came to a standstill by a little clearing. Over the earth were blowing and dancing delicate windflowers, white and mauve, flowing back among the trees like pale streams and cascading into hollows and over banks like purest snow, ceaselessly dancing and shining.

The draper and Effie threaded their way among the streaming whiteness of the flowers. Charlotte came behind, very flushed, unwinding her many scarves and her old mauve veil.

Effie and Henryson began to pick the flowers, stooping and walking slowly on together. She had no desire to pluck flowers, and knew that the anemones would droop, and she called out:

'No, no, don't pick them. They droop so soon. Only just sit still and watch them.'

Henryson looked up, displaying a nosegay already. 'Aren't you coming?' he called. 'Farther on there'll be primroses and bluebells.'

She shook her head. 'I only want to sit and watch,' she called. 'It's a good long time since I saw a wood in spring.'

She spread out her coat and sat under a birch tree and watched the trembling sheet of windflowers in the sunshine. This was all she asked. To sit and watch; to think; to be alone with herself; to be conscious of nothing but the windflowers and the sky. As she sat there, however, her heart as if in contradiction began to long for the draper also. She glanced up at him, as he squatted among the flowers in a new grey suit. Was it foolish at her age, with grown-up sons, to hope for the thoughts of a girl? Effie and the draper wandered off, following the pale tributaries of flowers. Soon she heard in the hush of the afternoon Effie's voice calling,

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'Primroses!—look at them!—primroses!' but she did not rise. The wood grew silent about her and she fell a prey to her thoughts again. And gradually she wove about her the fabrication of life as it might be, how she would marry the draper, help in the business she loved and leave the shop for ever.

She sat thinking of the happiness this would bring her. She felt still strong, mature, capable of love. She was like an old instrument; she would play if someone touched her. She closed her eyes, steeped in a blissful expectation of his return and of a love without which she felt unable to go on with the petty monotony of life as she had lived it for so long.

She got to her feet at last, afraid of the damp earth. The sun had dazzled her. The windflowers seemed to burst about her into a white flame. She began to walk down the slopes, up and down and onwards through young birches and half-budded oaks and swaying whips of hazel, meeting the primroses drifting up from the dark hollows and seeing the stains of turquoise that were the bluebells on the ridge beyond. With the spring sunshine and the scent and the prospect of summer about her she felt an atom of girlish ecstasy awake and warm her blood, as if it had lain for years in the darkness of her unconscious womanhood.

She walked slowly, along a narrow path which occasionally ran into an opening yellow with primroses. She could neither see nor hear Effie and the draper.

As she walked into a hollow of primroses splashed with blue and the deep gold of oxlips, she noticed something white, and stopped, and saw Effie's dress. The girl lay stretched among the primroses, looking up through the trees at the sky. She lay clasping the draper against her breast, kissing him; and the draper in return was murmuring and showering kisses too on her fat arms and lips and breast.

She retreated. Horrified and trembling, she sat down under a birch tree again, and for a moment she clung to the past, to

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her illusions, and to the expectation of another existence which had meant so much to her. But soon she let everything collapse, able to think of nothing but how vulgar and sordid it was to her, how she hated them both, how she would do all in her power to obstruct and defile and destroy their love, and plunge them into that same unhappiness into which she herself was sinking.

IV

For some weeks she hated Henryson. All her distrust for him returned. It was against her nature to forgive deceit and falsity; and she soured against him.

But after a week or two, this vindictiveness gradually gave way to something calmer—the same resignation as before, and to the old belief in the will of God and fate. It had happened: what could change that? What was to happen, would happen. And she induced herself to sink into a kind of indifference about them, trying to shut her eyes to their love.

There remained still a blackness of disappointment and loss in her, but she smothered it. Summer came, and Effie and the draper began to drive out together in the little green car, and the whole town knew of their attachment. She did not care. What they did, they did, and so it remained.

One day Henryson came to her and asked if he might marry Effie. She was prepared, and she received him calmly.

'You can marry her,' she said, too proud to show her grief, 'but not for a year, and only then if you've courted her properly.'

She still nursed some dark, primitive idea of thwarting him. In a year, who knows, it might be forgotten?

But as the summer went on she could see how antagonistic they were towards her. Effie was prouder and more distant than ever. She openly said sharp and bitter things to her

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mother, and she often looked at her as if to say: 'What right have you to be so selfish and narrow about us?'

Finally, in July, they were married secretly. Charlotte felt bewildered and wretched and reproached herself continually.

They did not come to see her until two months after their wedding. When they came Effie was slimmer and more shapely, as if married life and the change of environment and fresh work suited her. She looked happy; she was already going to have a baby. Underneath her pale green coat with primrose buttons and milk-white fur she was wearing a dress of cheicory blue with a white girdle. She looked very attractive, and Charlotte saw that the draper took a pride in her and cared for her.

They had come to ask if she would help when the baby came. After she had promised they went away again hurriedly, and did not come again until the pregnancy was five or six months old.

She grew used to her loneliness. She tried not to think much of Henryson and Effie.

The customers, however, liked to talk. 'Well,' they would say, 'and how is Effie?'

She generally knew nothing. That gave them a chance. Charlotte would be told the news.

'They've a new car, didn't you know? Yes, it's blue, a lovely thing with corded blinds and silver fittings for flowers. And they say she's going to have a baby. Is that so?'

'Yes, in the summer.'

'Perhaps that'll do her good—she needed something like that.'

'I think perhaps she did.'

'Yes. A pound of sausages.'

'Pork or tomato?'

'Pork, if you've got them. A baby is often the salvation of a girl like her. And a half of black pudding. They say

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she's changed already. Let's hope she'll come through it well.'

'I only hope so.'

The baby began to play an important part in her life; she was constantly thinking of it, imagining what it would be like, devising names and clothes for it as if it had been her own. Her bitterness and loneliness and hatred of Henryson were nullified when she thought of the baby. It seemed to embody her hopes and renew her fortitude and make life acceptable again.

When it was born she was unutterably glad at the sight of its tiny, red, crumpled face, and she found it marvellously consoling and beautiful to go about thinking of the child.

When she had nursed Effie she returned home, and then twice a week the girl and the baby came to stay with her while the draper drove to the villages to collect the weekly debts.

The girl had changed. Bearing the child had made her slim, and there was a certain beauty about her pale figure without its gross curves and insipid indolence. She was already indulging a love of lavish green and blue and yellow dresses, as she had always longed to do. Seeing her, Charlotte's envy awoke, and Henryson began slowly to mean nothing to her. As the girl sat on the American sofa talking to her baby or feeding it from her big white breasts, still almost virgin and tender, Charlotte was jealous of her, and the desire for creation in her would awake and fret her until she longed to take the child from its mother and suckle it too.

Later in the summer Effie and the draper began to drive out together to the villages and leave the baby alone with her all day. When she moved from the kitchen to the shop she wheeled the baby with her. She could not be separated from it. She felt as if her spirit were being infused with the child's, and lived utterly in the days when the baby was left alone with her.

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She had the baby one afternoon in the kitchen when she was rolling out pastry on a long table. Bowls of pepper and the dark wooden moulds for the pies stood in a row. An enormous black iron pot of chitterlings was boiling on the stove; a heap of raw pork stood ready for the pies.

As she rolled and moulded the yellowish pastry she talked to the child. He looked fixedly up at her from his pink-and-cream carriage, with soft black eyes, as if he understood.

'You dare look so, you beauty! Rascal! You know all about it! What is it then, who is it?' She put her face close to the child's. The child murmured and smiled. 'Ah! he knows. What should we do without him? He's so lovely my little one. Heaven knows what we should do without him.'

The bell rang in the shop. Wiping her floured hands on her pinafore she ran off, still calling to the baby as she ran.

The customer was anxious to talk.

'So you've got the baby again? You like that, I'll be bound? One small pork chop. Does he grow? Effie's changed—I hardly know her. Quite small—my husband's never in to dinner and I don't eat a stock. Are you well?'

'Oh! I've never been so well. I like the baby about me. He's a companion to me.'

'You'll spoil him.'

Charlotte smiled with guilt and happiness. 'He's spoilt already,' she confessed. 'We all spoil him.' She cut the pork chop skilfully.

Suddenly Charlotte stood alert, like a hare.

'I heard something!'

The women stood tense and listening.

They heard a faint sound, a sound of escaping steam, and then a terrible cry. Hearing the scream of the child Charlotte threw down her knife and rushed into the kitchen. Scalding water was pouring over the child's face from the meat-pot.

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The carriage had slipped on. But the baby had ceased screaming when she arrived. There was no sound but a faint growling in the pot and a hiss of steam.

v

After the child had died, Charlotte was left alone. The draper and Effie did not come to see her.

She closed the shop every Thursday, put on black clothes, and went to the cemetery. She spent a long time trimming the grass, watering the soil and arranging chrysanthemums at the head of the tiny mound. After a time the keeper came to know her, and she to recognise the same faces week after week, and gradually she gained a sort of happiness from it all.

She came home very tired one Thursday, and found a letter awaiting her. She sat down on the broken sofa overlooking the narrow yard and read it.

The shop-bell rang as she was reading. She lifted her head from her hands, slowly dried her moist eyes, and then went to answer.

A little boy stood at the counter. He searched for the money in the pocket of his blue blouse and looked up at her.

'A polony, please,' he said. His voice was timid. He stretched out his hand.

To Charlotte he looked like a small pink ghost. His eyes never left her. His childish stare, as he watched her pick out the fat red sausage and wrap it up for him, contained such a profundity of trust and belief in her that she felt she must talk to him. She placed the sausage on the counter and smoothed his hair and said:

'Do you know, I'm going to America.'

He did not appear to understand. He seemed to contract into a faint mistrust of her. He said nothing, and she repeated what she had said:

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'I'm going to America. Don't you know where that is?'

He shook his head, still regarding her.

'Not America?' She pressed his two cheeks with her hands. 'You don't know?'

'No,' he said.

'It's over the sea, a long way, I don't know how far.'

She could feel his trust for her ebbing away. His face seemed to slip through her fingers. His eyes were distant and half afraid.

He thought a moment, looking uneasy, and then asked:

'What are you going for?'

She shook her head. What was she going for?

The answer came to her lips half instinctively.

'I don't know.'

There was a pause again. He searched her with his eyes and seemed to ponder over her.

'Don't you want to go?' he said.

And the same answer started from her.

'I don't know, I don't know.'

He became more than ever like a pinkish-white ghost; she could discern only his small bright eyes fixed upon her with perplexity. He had now no faith in her. He stood a little away from the counter, hesitant and uneasy, gently critical of her with all his childish contempt and suspicion of grown-up tears.

Suddenly she could bear his stare no longer, and with an abrupt movement gave him the sausage, took his money and let him depart. Before withdrawing she saw him still watching her with curiosity, his little steadfast face a white blur in the falling dusk beyond the window.

She retired to the living-room, sat on the sofa and again read the letter her sons had sent asking her to go away. The

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house seemed stuffy and smelled of years of cooked meat. It was nauseating and loathsome, this smell, representing everything that had been worthless and ugly in her life—all that which had been colourless and had come to nothing. It was already too dark for her to decipher the letter. Instead she sat there with the child's naïve words going to the root of her being again: 'What are you going for? Don't you want to go?' And, as before, she was at a loss for an answer. As the autumn afternoon faded, its primrose driven away by gold and tawny orange, and the first purplish red of darkness, she thought of America again and again, and the thought of being uprooted frightened her. Could she go? How far was it? How many miles? The uncertainty of an unknown, far-off world, and the slightest tremor at the roots which bound her to the place where she had come as a young wife and where she now sat alone appalled her.

There remained at last only a scrap of blue in the sky, pale as a hyacinth, fledged by a ring of clouds as pure and delicate as flowers of snow. As darkness came on, she took her candle and chopped her kindling and laid a fire in the copper, ready for the following day.

Finally she sat down and by and by, in the gaslight, read her letter again. All at once it was as if she fell into a dream; the past had come back, her sons were still with her, she had never loved the draper and the child had never died. She was going away; she was going to uproot herself. Life would be different. There was a marvellous happiness awaiting her. She was never coming back again.

And as suddenly it vanished. She got up quickly, put away her letter and set about grilling the sausages.

Punctually at half past eight she carried them into the crowded shop, saw the same faces as ever and heard the same voices, skilfully slid off the steaming sausages, and asked her usual question:

'Well, and what was it like at the theatre to-night?'

CHARLOTTE ESMOND

And with the same gentle, ladylike smile she listened to the babble of friendly voices. And while she listened she kept telling herself that perhaps after all it was the Will of God, that what was to happen would happen, and that when it was time to change or move or die it would be so. One knew no more.

A FLOWER PIECE

THE blackthorn tree stooped over the high bank above the road. Its branches were clouded with white blossom, and the spring sunlight threw lace-like patterns on the earth that had been trodden bare underneath the tree. The grass of the bank was scattered with big, pale-blue violets and stars of colt's-foot and daisies very like chance blackthorn blossoms that the wind had shaken down. In the hedge behind the blackthorn were companies of pale green lords-and-ladies that had thrust up their unfurled hoods through a thicket of dog's-mercury. They looked cold and stately. The sunlight was sharp and brilliant, and against the blue of the sky the blackthorn tree was whiter than a summer cloud.

On the road below stood a row of cottages and in the back gardens wives were beating carpets and gossiping. A clergyman rode by on a bicycle, carrying *The Times* and a bunch of daffodils. A blackbird squawked and dipped across the road and vanished into a spinney of hazels as he passed.

A girl of seven or eight was sitting under the blackthorn. The tree was so twisted and stooping that she sat there in a kind of room, shut in by a roof and walls of blossoming branches. It was very sweet and snug there on the dry floor in the freckling sunlight. She had taken off her pinafore and had spread it across the earth and had set in the centre of it a tin that had once held peaches. In the tin she was arranging flowers among ivy leaves and grasses. She had put in celandines and dog-violets and colt's-foot and a single dandelion, with a spray or two of blackthorn. She arched her fingers very elegantly and sat back to admire the effects. She had fair, smooth hair, and she had made a daisy chain to bind round her forehead. It gave her a very superior and ladylike air which was not lost on her.

Presently she ceased arranging the flowers and began to smooth her dress and polish her finger-nails on her palms,

A FLOWER PIECE

lingering over them for a long time. At last there was a movement in a hawthorn bush a little distance away and a voice called quietly:

'Do I have to come in now?'

The girl looked up in the direction of the voice.

'You have to wait till I tell you,' she whispered sharply.

And then in a totally strange voice, very high-pitched and affected, like the voice of a stage duchess, she sang out:

'I'm at my toilet, my dear. An awful nuisance. Do excuse me.'

'I see.'

'Only a moment! I'm still in my *deshabille*.'

She began to make hurried imaginary movements of slipping in and out of garments. Finally she undid two buttons at the neck of her dress and turned back the bodice very elegantly, revealing her naked chest. She looked down at herself in admiration, breathing heavily once or twice, so that her bosom rose and fell very languidly and softly. She gave one last touch to the flowers in the peach-tin and then whispered:

'You can come in now. Act properly.'

Another child came out of hiding and stood outside the hawthorn tree. She was a brown, shy, unassuming creature, about six or seven, with beautiful dark eyes that reflected the dazzling whiteness of the sloe blossom so perfectly that they took fresh light from it. Her voice was curiously soft and timid and whispering.

'Do I have to come straight in?' she said.

'You have to be in the garden first. You look at the flowers and then you ring and the servant comes.'

'Oh! what lovely may,' said the other child, talking softly to herself.

'It's not may! It's lilac.'

'Oh! What lovely lilac. Oh! dear, what lovely lilac.'

She pulled down a branch of blossom and caressed it with

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her cheek. It was very sweet and she sighed. She acted very charmingly, and finally she rang the bell and the servant came.

'May I see Mrs. Lane?'

'Not Mrs. Lane,' came an awful whisper. 'Lady Constance. You're Mrs. Lane.'

'Is Lady Constance in?'

'Will you go into the drawing-room?'

She stooped and went through a space in the blackthorn branches. The fair child for a moment did not notice her. She had broken off a thorn and she was absorbed in stitching imaginary embroideries very delicately. Suddenly she glanced up with a most perfect exclamation of well-mannered surprise.

'My dear Mrs. Lane! It is Mrs. Lane, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'How sweet of you to come. Won't you sit down? I'll ring for tea. You must be tired.' Ting-a-ling-a-ling! 'Oh! Jane, will you bring tea at once, please. Thank you. Oh! do sit down, won't you?'

'Where do I sit?' said the brown child.

'On the floor, silly!' whispered the fair girl. 'Oh! do take the settee, won't you?'

'I was admiring your lovely may,' said the brown child.

'The lilac? Oh! yes, wouldn't you like to take some?'

'Oh! Yes. May I?'

She began to crawl through the break in the branches again. Instantly the fair child was furious.

'You don't have to do that until I tell you,' she whispered.

'Come back and sit down now. Oh! yes, of course,' she said aloud. 'I'll tell the gardener to cut you some.'

The brown-eyed child crept back under the tree and sat down. She looked very meek and solemn and embarrassed, as though she were really in a drawing-room and did not know what to do with her hands. The fair child was acting superbly, not one accent or gesture out of place. The maid arrived with the tea, and the fair one said with perfect sweetness:

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'Milk and sugar?'

The dark child had become busy with hidden knots, her frock uplifted, and she did not hear. The fair-haired child took one look at her and became furious again.

'Put your clothes down,' she whispered terribly. 'You're showing all you've got.'

'I can't help it. It's my knickers. I want some new elastic.'

'But you mustn't do it. Not in the drawing-room. We're ladies!'

'Ladies do it.'

'Ladies don't do it! Ladies have to sit nice and talk nice and behave themselves.'

The brown-eyed child surrendered. She looked as though she were bored and bewildered by the affectations of the fair child and by the prospect of being a lady. She was constantly glancing with an expression of quiet longing at the blackthorn blossom, the blue sky and the flowers arranged in the peach-tin.

'Milk and sugar?' repeated the fair child.

'Oh! yes please.'

There were no teacups, but the fair child had gathered a heap of stones for cakes. The brown child sat with a stone in her hand. The other took a cake between her finger-tips and made elegant bites and munched with a sweetish smile. She made small talk to perfection, and when she drank her tea she extended her little finger. Finally she observed that the dark child was neither eating nor drinking. She looked at her as if she had committed unpardonable sins in etiquette.

'Aren't you having any tea?' she said icily.

The brown-eyed child looked startled and then declared timidly:

'I don't want to play this game.'

'Why don't you want to play?'

The brown child did not answer. All the dignity of the fair child at once vanished. She made a gesture as though it

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were difficult to bear all the shortcomings of the younger child.

'All because you can't act,' she said tartly.

'Let's go out and get violets and be real people.'

'We are real people. You play so silly. You aren't old enough to understand.'

The brown-eyed child looked acutely depressed. Suddenly she dropped the stone and began to creep out disconsolately from under the blackthorn tree. The fair child adopted a new, cajoling tone.

'It's easy,' she said. 'You only have to put it on a bit and you're a lady. We can start again and you can be a duchess. Come on.'

The dark child looked back for a moment very dubiously, as though it were too much to believe, and then walked away up the bank. The other child sniffed and tossed her head with fierce pride and called out:

'You needn't think you can come back here now you've gone.'

Without answering, the brown-eyed child walked away behind the hawthorn trees and by the hedge at the top of the bank. She became lost in a world of dog's-mercury and budding hawthorn and pale violets. She came upon primrose buds and finally a cluster of opened primroses and a bed of white anemones. Talking to herself, she gathered flowers and leaves and put them in her hair, as the fair girl had done.

The fair child crept out from under the blackthorn tree. She had tucked her frock in her pale blue knickers and she stood upright on her toes, like a ballet-dancer. She broke off a spray of blackthorn and held it with both hands above her head and then twirled on her toes, and did high kicks and waltzed majestically round and round the blackthorn tree. Now and then she broke out and sang to herself. She introduced a stage vibrato into her voice, and she danced

A FLOWER PIECE

about the blackthorn tree to the tune she made, acting perfectly.

Finally the brown-haired child came down the bank again. She saw the fair child dancing and she suddenly conceived a desire to dance too. She stood by the tree and waited. The fair girl saw her.

'You needn't come here!' she sneered.

A spasm of sadness crossed the face of the dark child. She turned and descended the bank very slowly, sometimes pausing and looking backward and then edging unwillingly away. Finally, with the primroses and the single anemone still shining in her hair, she reached the road and walked slowly away and disappeared.

When she had gone there was nothing left to interrupt the gaiety of the dancing child, the flowers about the earth and the blackthorn tree scattering its shower of lovely stars.

THE HESSIAN PRISONER

It was towards the middle of June, in the year 1917, when Jasper and Clara Bird obeyed for the first time certain instructions written out for them by a little black major presiding over the camp for prisoners of war, and harnessing their white horse and cart, drove off a little before eight o'clock one morning to fetch the German they had hired with so much misgiving in a great extremity.

They often remembered that day. It was especially lovely: the air sultry with a menace of thunder and full of the singing birds as they drove away from the farm; the clear sky was alive with larks, and blackbirds and finches and yellow buntings were piping gently about the fields and in the thick trees, which were still sopped with dew. Like bass viols in an orchestra, bees had already begun to enrich and unify those sounds into a single immense harmony, the soft throbbing concert of perfect summer.

It was hay-time. The sound of a horse-mower or a whetstone upon a scythe would echo across the valley; and even at that early hour of the day freshly mown swathes were already turning white under the heat of the sun.

War had forced this small tenant-farmer and his wife to a crisis in their affairs; by instinct they feared and hated war, but recently its barbarism had brought calamity upon them. In times of peace and in the early years of war, they had employed two labourers and a boy of sixteen, but suddenly the boy had drifted off to make boots in an adjoining town, and the men had failed to convince the tribunal; and then the news had come that one was dead and that the other lay stricken by some nameless incurable disease, on strange and distant territory. The hopeless and chaotic inhumanity of war then became suddenly personal; war itself assumed, as it were, a physical shape, and for that shape they gradually conceived a terrible, vindictive hatred. Besides grief there arose the problem of

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how to replace the men, and they discovered that men were scarcer than gems. Women, dressed foolishly in smocks and breeches, were plentiful enough, but they distrusted and despised them. And so for a long time they deliberated, until at last it appeared that nothing remained for them but to act as *their neighbours had done*; and finally, *timidly and suspiciously*, they applied for a prisoner of war.

Driving to fetch him for the first time they sat in silence. Their steadfast, honest, taciturn faces seemed uneasy and plunged in gloom. Leaning his arm on the disused umbrella-basket, the man drove in a desultory, almost indifferent fashion, and beside him his wife never moved except to chew a yellow bent or to finger, abstractedly, her dark hair.

Otherwise they looked, that morning, much as usual. The man was without a jacket, and his stoat-coloured corduroys were held up by two leather thongs affixed in turn by thin nails for buttons. A panama hat, ripe and ancient even before catastrophe had fallen upon them, flooded his face with a sunny orange; his mouth was concealed by an unclipped yellow moustache, bristling like horned wheat; his fair brows straggled down, in tiny curls, before his blue, drowsy eyes. His wife was a neat and compact body, with hair of jet and breasts as small as teacups, and the blouse she wore was of the same blue-and-white stuff as Jasper's shirt, cut from a cheap length picked up one day at market. Her crude boots were laced with string, and that morning her white crushable hat had fallen in cow-slime and simply through negligence or haste had not been cleaned again. With the motion of the cart their loose, brown, awkward bodies jolted constantly up and down, and their eyes fixed themselves continually upon the distance, as if watching something.

They had many doubts as to the wisdom of hiring this prisoner. Though it constantly troubled them, however, they secretly wondered what he would be like. Deeply sceptical, the man fancied a stout, spectacled, ponderous

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fellow who, in private life, had perhaps been a doctor or a minister of religion, a man utterly useless to him. Reminiscent of what she had so often seen in the newspapers, Clara always visualised some immense, barbaric Prussian, who would terrify their lives and steal and finally escape, leaving them at the mercy of the authorities.

And as they drove up to the gates of the camp they became nervous, foreseeing the worst. Some sentries were pacing their distances under a great avenue of trees. Jasper had to present an official paper, converse a little, and then follow a soldier down the avenue out of sight.

Impassively chewing the grass and regarding the sentry with native curiosity, the woman suddenly let loose her imagination and a host of unbelievable horrors and terror stormed through her mind, until she felt she already feared and hated the prisoner.

'What with one thing and another, he'll make life miserable for us,' she thought.

In the midst of these meditations Jasper reappeared in the avenue. She looked up suddenly, and seeing the prisoner between Jasper and the soldier, thought in a flash:

'He's a terrible great fellow!'

That was all. And before she was aware of it, all formalities were over and she was making room for him in the rear of the cart. Then events came swiftly; the prisoner climbed into the cart, weighing it heavily backward; the sentry retreated; Jasper moved the seat a couple of notches forward for better balance; and suddenly they drove away.

The man, a Hessian, was a young fellow, very tall and even fairer than Jasper, with a physique that had something godlike and splendid about it. Once or twice they heard him moving clumsily behind, and Clara, suspicious and afraid, turned to see that he was not escaping them. But it was simply that he could not adjust his huge proportions to the confined space of the cart.

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During that journey, they repeatedly spied upon him from the corners of their eyes. All this time his large hands lay loosely in his knees and he constantly surveyed the sky, the distant woodland, and the fresh fertile valley through which they were passing, and something docile, ingenuous, wondering, was always expressed in that stare, and sometimes he appeared to sigh, as if with relief.

At last the small white farmstead appeared and the pony slackened its pace.

'Get down and open the gate,' said Jasper almost in an undertone.

Clara stood up; and then a curious thing happened. The springs of the cart gave a sudden heave, and with an easy, cumbrous alacrity, the prisoner jumped down and flung open the gate, and before she could put her foot on the step or could recover from the astonishment, he caught the pony's head and walked beside it until Jasper halted. Then he stood quite still, almost to attention. His large, mobile eyes seemed to reflect perfectly the heaven's blue in the shadow of the stables as he stood, very watchful and very alert, waiting for her to alight. But when Jasper commenced in his customary deliberate way to unharness, the prisoner rapidly unloosed the belly-band, then the bridle and collar, and suddenly, almost as if impatient, seized the harness complete and bore it into the stables. There he noted with a singular air of concentration where each part was hung, nodding frequently in a way almost boyish in its vehemence, so that when Clara came in and dropped the long green cart-cushions on an orange-box, she returned the sudden stare he gave her with confusion, fear and mistrust, already resentful of his presence. Jasper, failing also to understand this adroitness and courtesy, never withdrew his eyes from him.

Shortly, in silence, they walked to the house, Jasper leading, after him the prisoner, then Clara. All their movements were provoked by fear and by distrust, so that when Clara

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dropped a hairpin, suspicion and dread forced her to keep watch on him even as she groped for it among the straw.

It was their custom to eat first at half past five and again at nine, and Clara began to cut pieces of bread and Jasper slices of cold bacon immediately they reached the kitchen, and some dry boughs were found and put under the kettle. All the time the Hessian leaned timidly against the lintel, as boys do at the doors of blacksmiths' or bakers' shops, and watched them.

'Come in—eat—sit down!' Jasper suddenly urged; but the Hessian did not move. 'Eat—fodder—bread! Eh? Come—understand?—Sit down, eh?' But there was no answer.

Clara left off cutting and stared, just in time to see Jasper, suddenly inspired, rub his paunch and laugh, and to hear the prisoner's sudden low, 'Ja! Ja!' of delight.

'Come! Understand?' bawled Jasper with immense joy, rubbing his belly repeatedly.

'Ja! Ja!'

And wiping his hands over his greyish-blue uniform and looking this way and that, with a little curiosity and mistrust perhaps also, the prisoner slowly crossed the threshold.

It seemed natural to them that he should eat with them. They had no children. If there had been many prisoners it would have been different; in that case a barn would have done; but about one prisoner alone in a barn there seemed something callous and altogether against their principles, and very deep within them also burned a sense of fierce responsibility, of unshakable, stolid honour, the thought that they must never lose sight of him, that they must guard him with the bravest vigilance, that they must see him safely back to the camp each evening. Failure in these things brought consequences unknown, unthinkable, and terrible.

They began to eat. Like a child in the presence of strange people the prisoner was awkward and timid and never spoke,

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but only once made a sound, low and inarticulate, as of gratitude, when a cup was given him, though Jasper's sudden snap, like a dog's, at a great slice of bacon, a crude sort of encouragement to him to do likewise without delay, brought a smile to his soft mouth and destroyed momentarily his look of astonished vacancy.

Eventually the meal was over. Leading the way into the cowyard, Jasper was dwarfed by the magnificent bulk of the young Hessian, and something about that mere physical incongruity attracted Clara, so that she remained on the doorstep, watching, some moments after hurling the warm tea-leaves among the hens.

Jasper turned into a barn and the Hessian followed him, stooping. A curious piece of comedy began. Jasper shovelled up some dung with grave deliberation; the prisoner watched; then with an emphatic gesture, Jasper flung the dung into the sunshine, and the prisoner nodded; almost delighted at the success of this dumb show, Jasper then made a singularly expressive gesture intended to be authoritative and at the same time knowing and good-natured, and suddenly performing a very ancient trick of his, lowering his right eyebrow and gazing heavenward as if to say, 'None of your tricks with me,' he thrust the shovel into the prisoner's hands, planted himself firmly upon his legs and acted with remote resemblance to a prison-warder. Probably much too excited to note the details of all this, the Hessian began at once shovelling away dung in enormous quantities and with a pleasing competence and gusto. Jasper, plunged into agreeable reflections, stood with some pleasure meditatively scratching his back. Then by a strange coincidence the Hessian also began to scratch, and suddenly they looked at each other, with the result that, amid a great burst of laughter, the Hessian in frantic haste made a search of his person, and being apparently rewarded made an extremely clever click with his thumb and forefinger and gravely blew the imaginary

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louse away. Whether this was reality or only the prisoner's foolery, Jasper never knew, but abruptly he went off into uncontrollable and prolonged laughter, while the Hessian caught more fleas and disposed of them with the dexterity and callousness of great experience.

Unexpectedly the situation became worse. Jasper's back began to itch in a most alarming way, and in an inaccessible and maddening spot. He began squirming, scratching, dancing and saying; 'Oh, my God! this is too much, I'll swear my oath this one's a monster!' until the Hessian, thinking this foolery also, went wild with delight and began punching Jasper in the small of the back, which produced exactly the effect of his punching a rubber squeaky doll, except that Jasper was screaming with laughter at the top of his voice, resembling more than anything the screeching of an enraged goose.

Clara had not heard that laugh for many years; now it seemed to her like some uncanny and fantastic echo of the past. She gave one immense start on hearing it, and then from the kitchen door ran across the cattle-yard as if it were a cry of pain.

At the barn, however, she stood petrified. Jasper and the prisoner looked to be wrestling or fighting. At the same time there was this uproarious, unaccountable, almost unseemly laughter.

'What's the matter with you, you idiots?' she managed to call at last.

'Eh? What?' the laughter lessened a little.

'What's the matter with you?' she cried.

Her face expressed something so astounded and so incredulous that they again burst into laughter, which was prolonged some minutes, while she impatiently or mutely again urged them to explain themselves. At last she was told:

'We both think we're covered in fleas! That's all. You see he can't explain, and neither can I.'

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Suddenly she also began laughing, and her laugh caused a shy, soft and almost startled expression to flicker over the face of the prisoner, and from that moment all was different. Fear no longer troubled her, and from the way Jasper looked up at the prisoner, still laughing and occasionally squirming, she could tell that he also had passed out of reach of the same emotion.

'It's all right,' she thought, 'most likely he's glad to be out of it. Perhaps he even knows that he'll be happy here—at any rate we shall feed him, authorities or no authorities, and perhaps in time we shall learn not to worry him quite so much.'

Back in the house these notions increased in their peculiar persuasion, so that her suspicions also lessened, and her mind became sweet and calm.

Then Jasper came in, laughing still, but in a suppressed way, like a hen clucking with pleasure. He belched out, with evident satisfaction too, the words:

'I've left him to himself.'

And in that utterance reposed an essence of something daring, reckless, almost impossible, and as if it had been the utterance of a mischievous infant, Jasper chuckled again.

Before evening, by a repetition of certain acts of courtesy, he had become to the woman the embodiment of grace and trust, and to the man, who ruminated constantly upon his competence with tools, beasts, and machines, not only a great wit, but a Hercules, a man with a head on his shoulders, indeed the very masterpiece of a man; and though much too cautious ever to commit themselves, they began to look forward to hay-time with his help as an event of fine expectation and great promise.

A few weeks elapsed. During that time the prisoner, whose name was Johann, acquired from the camp and the farm a little English, which led first to a brief exchange of words of the simplest meaning, and then to conversations of

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a more subtle nature, and gradually to a language which effected in their lives a deep, indescribable harmony.

In their taciturn way they became delighted at his presence on the farm with them. It became shortly nothing but Johann this, Johann that; and when, for reasons obscurely imposed by the authorities, he remained away on Sundays, they missed acutely his huge, ruddy, flaxen-haired figure and the sound of his voice, and the work he habitually did seemed to fall with unbearable heaviness upon them. Johann was a great worker, for trivial or important tasks he was a glutton—adaptable, conscientious, courteous, indefatigable, clever with implements, sagacious concerning crops, full of notions on domestic subjects. He was devoted to animals, calling the cows by name and bestowing upon one heavy-maned chestnut mare all the happy compassion and fidelity of a lover.

During hay-time he had been no less than a miracle. All the heaviest labour, including the building of ricks, he had taken upon himself. His great strength, his astuteness, his quick, inflexible and scientific organisation, amazed them.

They discovered much about him—that he had been severely wounded and would bleed violently from his nose, and that he was young enough to have been their son. All these things drove out the last of suspicion and fear concerning him. They began to regard him as a boy, tireless, genuine, lovable. Then, when it became not unusual for him to remain alone in the fields, they discovered that he could sing. The depth, the richness of his voice, stirred them deeply; and he sang repeatedly melodies of his boyhood, of the time when, they thought, he must have known country surroundings—quiet happiness, a lover, and the old, irresponsible days of peace; and his voice would recreate for him the essence of that incomparable time.

When hay-time had passed there arrived that time of lingering, of expectation, of the promise of harvest, resembling the last months of a pregnancy.

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It was the custom, on hot days, to sit out for meals under the large walnut tree spreading to the south of the farmhouse. Propped up against the bole, the Birds ate their dinner of bread, meat, and cheese, with beer, in a matter-of-fact, contented way. Sometimes when stirred to an unusual degree of indignation by fresh and more terrible news of fighting, Jasper would launch forth on a discussion on war, hotly maintaining that all sides were mad, callous, inhuman, declaring that only the innocent suffered, pointing out the monstrous folly of that state which could spend millions on saving its people from smallpox, cancer, tuberculosis, pneumonia, merely that they might be thrown, like worthless scraps, into the belly of war.

Johann used to squat with an ash-stave between his knees, feeling and smoothing it and uttering approving murmurs. These moments of unexpected indignation—of futile rage against the inevitable—found an eager response in him. Much of the argument would escape him; as to the rest, he could only passionately agree, and each argument and display of indignation brought him closer to the Birds.

On one of these occasions he brought out a photograph to show them. It showed a kind-eyed, middle-aged and rather handsome German woman, dressed all in black except for a white kerchief over her head. When he began explaining, rapidly, piteously, almost unintelligibly, that this was his mother, tears started quickly to Clara's eyes and Jasper fell to biting his lips. And when he suddenly declared in broken language how like the affection of motherhood her own affection seemed, she ran away and wept bitterly.

'That's the most we could have done for him, poor child. His mother would know that.'

From that moment she went about with a sense of elation. Having no children, nothing in her life, she felt, had touched her so tenderly or happily as this comparison, this devoted trust in her; and whenever Johann called 'Clara!' across the

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yard or the fields, a little blood reddened her cheeks, the blood of a woman embarrassed or delighted, the blood of an awakened affection.

Harvest came. Over the bleached ripe fields seemed to float small mauve and scarlet fleets of scabious and poppies, and the heat came in stifling waves across the corn.

Once again his boisterous, never-sleeping strength, his exuberance, his unselfishness, made them ask themselves:

‘What should we have done without him?’

It was late September before they erected the last stack. When they brought up the last wagon and began filling in the roof it was evening, growing cool, and the horses were restless. Johann was in a careless mood and was laughing and singing as he took up the sheaves.

Suddenly, in the midst of all this, the horses jerked on and a wagon-wheel scraped against the ladder on which Johann was standing. Almost at once the ladder toppled and slid slowly across the smooth straw, and in a second or two, almost before the terrible ‘Johann! Johann!’ had sprung from their lips, the prisoner was flung over the terrified horses’ heads and thrown violently to earth.

‘Johann! Johann!’ they continued to call against each other in terror. ‘Good God! Oh, good God!’

In terror they became helpless and pathetic. It was inconceivably hard for them to climb out of the wagon, to run and to watch that prostrate figure, and to endure the agonies of uncertainty. Again they were like children. They were numb. But the sight of the Hessian crawling slowly to his feet filled them with a strange, boundless, almost intoxicating joy, and they began without hesitation to fuss about him with little cries, with desperation, with hands trembling with anxiety to touch, to soothe, to set at rest the last doubts.

Meanwhile the prisoner was violently shaking his head and repeating, ‘Nein, nein, nein,’ with great excitement.

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'What? Not hurt? Nowhere!'

'Nein! Nein! Noding, noding!'

And though still in terror, they ran their hands over his great limbs, much as men do when they buy a prime beast.

Further consternation followed, for Jasper in a sudden rage strode up to the horses and struck them, first with his fist, and then harder, with his knees, in their bellies, until the prisoner, as if strangely upset by this attack, fainted. That was the last straw. Disaster, fear of death, had paralysed them. Johann's fainting fit set them running, like two clockwork dolls, into all conceivable holes and corners, wherever by chance fate might have left remedies. Then, having revived him, they searched him for wounds and bruises only to find that, apart from one bluish mark, there was nothing; he was unblemished.

Some weeks elapsed. Harvest was over; a little yellow sprinkled the elms. Jasper and the prisoner found amusement in splashing walnuts, but though the Hessian was extremely active, at moments he appeared to wince, as if suffering some acute stab of pain. Apart from this the days were tranquil, ineffably at peace, and transcended, like those of a woman delivered at last, and there spread over the farm great broodings and quietnesses broken only by occasional visits of commissioners of food and supplies, who bullied and shouted patriotic nonsense, or by the halting of a battalion not far off, and its men coming in for water and lingering about the well, talking and smoking.

But, whatever happened, the affection and harmony which united them did not change except to increase and to bind them closer.

It was towards November that the prisoner began to cause them uneasiness. He became less active, and moved laboriously, as if his legs were weighted, and the tasks he had once performed like a Samson, boisterously and with singing, suddenly seemed to intimidate him.

THIRTY TALES

What was wrong with him? They speculated, argued, questioned him. Secretly proud of his strength, however, he would divulge nothing. One morning his nose bled violently, and they began to fear that some complication might arise from his wound and the fall, and they urged him to report himself to the prisoners' doctor.

'Ach!'—and that was enough to convey how disgusting that idea was to him.

His appearance presented at first no change. At times he even recaptured his boisterousness and again worked with the old miraculous strength. But many relapses occurred, and by the end of November his face had become like that of an anæmic woman.

They saw a strange drooping about his shoulders. They began to reason with him; he was adamant, would not listen, and half-s swaggeringly drew off his shirt and invited them to examine his clear brown flesh, and when they could discover no blemish, turned on them with a sort of angry pity:

'Ach, you thought dere was something, but there is nothing, hein!'

They were repelled by this attitude, and preserved silence until one afternoon of cold rain, winds and storms of yellow and rusty leaves, when they were sacking potatoes in the barn. The sacks were filled by Jasper and Clara and, though it was against their wishes, Johann built them in a mound against the wall. As the mound grew, sweat poured down his face, and he struggled in a way which hurt them. But he would hear nothing, though their reproofs were gentle, and the strength of his resolution and resistance grew like some half-fanatical religion, filling his eyes with a consuming light.

Nevertheless, striving to heave a full sack above his head some moments later, the strength in him, as if cut off as suddenly and effectually as an electric current, failed utterly. The sack dropped like a stone. Potatoes were disgorged

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bouncing in all directions. He remained immovable, dumb, stupid, as if regarding them as so many comic balls dancing about his feet.

'Johann! Johann!' they cried. They too stared at the potatoes. They began to stammer reproaches.

'You should have reported as we told you, directly you felt anything after that fall! Look what a way you fell. Oh, why didn't you go? . . . and now! You see, its perhaps inside you—here! And the wound!—God alive, how you can keep on? Why didn't you go? why didn't you go a month back?' and so on, despairing or reasoning, until the woman launched at him a different cry:

'Your mother would want you to go!'

At those words he gave a violent start, and tears of hatred and remorse sprang into his eyes, and when he tried to answer their reproaches he failed miserably, which made him even more inexorable, more fanatical in the notion of carrying out his will. He stood in the midst of the scattered potatoes resembling an animal that has wounded itself but will die rather than suffer hands laid upon it, and nothing would induce him to surrender that defiant attitude.

Thus they passed through a period of mystification and trial, torn between tenderness, anger, and despair at the sight of him wasting and suffering before their eyes. Their distress was piteous. They became practical, insistent upon his accepting their aid, their ointments from herbs, their poultices and country decoctions. They administered with great faith. They cherished tenderly and jealously the dream of his being cured by their devoted skill and solicitude.

They had great hope in him. The work he did, however, was negligible, and it became difficult for him to carry a faggot or take a bucket to the well. Sometimes they caught him with his head buried in his hands or standing pale and still, with a vacant expression, like a ghost, in the first attitudes of voluntary subjection and despair.

THIRTY TALES

And then, late one afternoon, Clara came crying across the farmyard for Jasper. He was chopping wood in the orchard. She halted some yards from him, called his name and began stamping her feet and wringing her hands in terror.

'My God, what is it?' he shouted.

'It's Johann! It's Johann!'

He dropped his axe and, following her, kept asking:

'What is it? What's the boy done?'

'Oh! I don't know. He's fallen . . . he just lies there.'

When they reached him he was lying upon his side, in the twilight stable, beneath the belly of a horse he had been grooming; the horse-comb was clenched in his hand; the horse stood motionless. As they dragged him away and propped him against some sacks of corn he gave a groan. He was revolting to see; he had been bleeding heavily from the nose, and to Jasper he seemed already moribund; his eyes bore a strange glassy look as if he had been crying when he fell. He lay still; nor did he reply to their entreaties:

'Johann, Johann, what happened? How did you come to fall? My boy, what's the matter? Tell us, what's the matter? Tell us what it is, tell us, my boy?'

But he was silent; and then, before they had summoned courage or thought, and while the woman was still too curious and frightened for grief and the man too shocked to act, he began a brief stirring and there was a rustling in his throat, as if he wished to speak to them; and when this had ceased, leaving, as it were, its echo in a prolonged and agonising sigh, his face seemed suddenly softened and chastened and his head fell softly back upon the corn-sacks, and he died.

Hopelessness and panic seized them. They tried to lift him and take him away, and their bungling movements seemed to scare the horses who, smelling death, began stamping restlessly in their stalls. Darkness was falling

THE HESSIAN PRISONER

rapidly, making the young prisoner's face ghostly, and lighting a stable lantern they set it beside the corpse, which their last efforts had given a strange dignity, and stared at each other with sad eyes.

And then the thought entered their minds:

'We're responsible for him—shouldn't we send a message or else take him back to the camp again?'

Except themselves they had no one by whom to send a message, and suddenly their old fear of regulations, soldiers, and authorities returned with overwhelming force, and they began to harness the horse in order to take him away.

'Take the feet,' said Jasper.

'Oh! I can't lift him. What shall we do?'

'Try, woman, try. Again.'

'Oh! dear Lord, I can't do it.'

They struggled, but beside him they seemed old and feeble, and in dying he seemed to have become a giant. And then, as if this were not enough, Jasper knocked over the lantern, and in terror they dropped the body and groped and ran against each other, the woman crying and the man swearing violently.

Finally it was done, and they prepared to drive off. Objects in the darkness, familiar little sounds and obscure movements caused them to recall his life with them.

The cart lurched into the high-road. It was dark. They drove slowly, not speaking. On either side rose the gaunt skeletons of trees, and on the road their feeble shaded cart-lamps threw two tiny gleams, which ran steadily, everlastingly on beside the horse. Suddenly, without warning, it seemed bitterly cold, with a smell of autumnal decay.

As they began to drive downhill into the valley it seemed that they were descending into a black pit of great depth, and at that point, with the increased jolting of the cart, the prisoner's head began to beat like a dull mallet against the woodwork of the cart.

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As if unable to bear that sound, Clara stooped at once, half-knelt and then took the head in her hands and for what seemed unending moments held it without moving. At last, without deliberating and impelled by some obscure desire, she planted softly between his eyes a brief kiss, and there crept into her grief at once a sense of peace, of elation, a feeling of nobility, a sensation of jealousy resembling that of a mother. And all along the road she remained holding the head, at times with all the fierce instincts of her womanhood, at times with tenderness, as if he knew of her touch on him, and sometimes for long periods without a movement, without a thought, listening mechanically to the sound of wheels and hoofs, the dry cracking of Jasper's whip, and of her own weeping, the low sound of which broke from her with great sorrow, and expanding infinitely, seemed to fill the increasing darkness.

FISHING

It was summer. The hot, still days were followed by evenings of a lovely sultry peacefulness scented with mown hay, dog-roses and clover. The river, day and night, looked as if it slept between its rows of still luscious green reeds.

Two old friends since youth, Will and Matthew, would often on such evenings walk out together as far as the woods, across the cornfields, along to the edge of the marshes or by the river. They were widowers, and all the time they talked tenderly of the past, deploring the present and recalling wistfully memories of early days.

When they walked by the river or sat on the towing-path gates or leaned over the bridge they talked of fishing. They talked also of otter-chasing, of snipe, wild-duck, kingfishers and reed-pipers, of the strange cries of meadow-crakes and owls, of all those things in their lives which were now no more than memories.

On the bridge one evening, as they watched the flies dancing over the clear, dark surface of the stream and the water flapping sleepily against the reeds and willow-roots, Will pointed and said:

‘I’ve caught scores of eels under that willow.’

‘I’ve been with you,’ said Matthew, shaking his head, ‘often and often.’

‘Used to lay the lines overnight,’ went on the other. ‘Every summer.’

‘And then come in the morning before it was daylight.’

‘Ah, come in the morning before it was daylight and take the eels.’

This brief, wistful reflection made them silent. It was between sunset and the summer darkness. Under the bridge the water looked already black and oily, but on Matthew’s watch-chain a medal he had won for fishing still gleamed brightly, and the air was still intoxicating and full of warmth.

THIRTY TALES

In the heavy stillness their voices were a dull murmur.

'What times we had! How many times I've been on my belly under that tree!'

They kept glancing up at the willow-tree. A flock of birds went over, heading for the green sky above the sunset. Everywhere was silent.

And then suddenly Matthew exchanged a glance with Will, gazed at the river again and said:

'Could we catch eels now?'

Without a pause Will exclaimed: 'Catch eels! There's nothing in it.'

'I've been thinking——'

'You just give me an eel-line and I'll peg it with my eyes shut—and there'd be fish too, mind you.'

Another and even more murmurous, wistful silence came over the river after these words. Then Matthew spoke:

'I've been wondering whether we shouldn't lay a few lines under that willow-tree,' he said.

'Give me a line, I say, and I'll peg it and there'll be fish.'

'Shall we?'

'You give me a line.'

Will seemed to gaze into the cool sky with longing. Matthew said: 'Let's go, then. Up in my old loft there's a few lines hanging.'

But for a moment they did not go. In silence they remained watching the twilight creeping over the water, over the meadows, over the sky itself, turning the reeds to black tapers, making the river gleam like quicksilver. And to both the thought of setting eel-lines, coming down before dawn and taking out the fish was for a moment too entrancing to be true.

Presently, however, they did go. In the river, as they crossed the bridge, Matthew's shadow was curved, with a white top, and though Will's was straighter and stiff, like a drumstick, it too was white at the head.

FISHING

Going up into the village between thick rows of hawthorn and elder, a smell of honeysuckle reached them.

'Be best to get there by four o'clock,' Matthew kept saying.

'We will. That's the best time; I know it is.'

'If only my old lines don't break!'

As they entered the village, came to Matthew's house, got out the lines and examined them, it seemed to both that they were about to do once again something splendid, adventurous and full of joy. They dug out worms.

When they returned it was still not late, though Matthew's watch-chain, the sky, the dog-roses all shone fainter than before. Only the smell of honeysuckle seemed stronger and more intoxicating.

The river looked more like dark oil than ever. The reeds, the water-grass and the willow-tree had turned quite black. Matthew kept stumbling over hoof-marks.

As Will knelt down, stretched on his belly and began to drop the lines into the water, he thought: 'The grass seems damp.' Matthew, on kneeling beside him, thought so too. But they said nothing to each other.

One after another the lines plopped, sank, and were made secure to the edge. With their ears so close, Matthew and Will could hear the rustle of weeds and of water creeping between.

They got up off their knees. Still it seemed to them, as they returned stumbling along the bank, that to set eel-lines at night, wake at four, and in the fresh summer dawn take home their load of fish, was as pleasant and exciting as it had been in their youth, and they talked of all the longest eels they had ever caught.

At Matthew's gate they reminded each other:

'At four, sharp. No later than four.'

And as their white old heads bobbed away from each other in the warm dark, Matthew remembered and called:

THIRTY TALES

'Bring a basket! Don't forget!'

In the morning, at dawn, a chill hangs over the river, the water looks cold and like steel, and the grass, the dog-roses and the honeysuckle are drenched in dew. From the east to the zenith a cold pink light spreads reluctantly, but there is no warmth and the leaves shiver. The reeds droop, looking a dirty, dishevelled green and with a rustling sound shudder and sway.

Among them, in the deep water under the willow-tree, five or six empty eel-lines sway backwards and forwards, first in the grey light, then in the rose, then in the soft early sunshine pouring from the blue sky.

Birds wake, cattle pass across the meadows, in the village a bell rings for an early service. But along the river-path nobody comes.

THE BAKER'S WIFE

AGAIN and again, shaking with anger, his voice bellowed up the stairs:

'Janet! Janet! when are you coming down?'

But the woman in the bed only hunched her shoulders, and shrinking deeper beneath the sheets, remained silent. The flame of a candle standing on the chest of drawers at the bedside reeled and uprighted itself, burning with a long sheath of light. In the shining eyes of the woman, as she watched it carelessly, its reflections were sharp and bright, giving them the same air of serene indomitable pride visible in the slow twining of a single black curl about her long right forefinger.

The voice called again, imperatively: 'Janet, Janet!' For a moment the motion of the finger went on, then suddenly the hair fell in a dark ringlet across her uncovered breast, and she answered slowly: 'I'm coming now,' and swung her feet to the floor.

She carried the candle with her to the dressing-table and set it against the clock there. The hands stood at half past three. She shuddered and yawned, then went to the little cracked washstand in the corner and dipped her hands into the water. Her fingers moved like the pale feelers of some slow water-creature, listless and dispirited. Her movements were apprehensive, too, as if she expected every moment another reminder from the voice below, and she brushed her hair in long, nervous sweeps that set her ears tingling, and stared at her young face in the glass from under lashes that blinked swiftly, as if repressing a flood of weeping.

And then again the voice from below startled her: 'When the devil do you think you're going to be ready, eh?'

Her lips moved quickly in a sharp reply and snapped together again. The other voice growled:

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'Every one else is on the road. Didn't they wake you goin' past? For God's sake hurry!'

Without another word she dressed quickly, almost viciously. From the road outside the low rumble of passing vehicles reached her, with the sharp clap of horses' feet and an occasional shout. When she had finished her hasty dressing she drew up the blind in impatient jerks and looked down into the street below. Between the long gulf of dark houses was passing a ragged procession of wagonettes, carts, vans and traps, each with its pair of lamps shining over the shadowy figures of the riders, men and women and even children, huddled together in the chill summer darkness. The sight seemed to weary her afresh, and suddenly she blew out the candle fiercely. In the other houses there were no lights, and except for the lamps passing endlessly below, and a few stars hanging over the roofs in the clear sky, the sombre darkness was unbroken.

As she was descending the stairs, the warm smell of fresh-baked bread rose and met her. In a moment her nostrils seemed to quiver with nausea and she stood still, trembling. Then her husband came running from the bakehouse, loaded with a great basket of fancy rolls. She could hear his breath hissing through his teeth. He caught sight of her standing there, and shouted as he passed out: 'Don't stand there like a dummy! Do something! You see how late we are!'

When he returned his mouth was full of bread. Angry and excited, he thrust a basket into her hands and told her to work. She obeyed without a word, but he filled four baskets to her one. She shuddered when he came near her. Everything—the sight of his lank figure, its pale, thin face running with sweat, its shirt wide open at the chest, its apron flapping like a dusty flag about his knees as he scurried hither and thither, its long, lean arms, its splay feet thrust into untidy slippers—was all hateful to her in its meanness.

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She flung her basket of rolls and pastries carelessly into the cart outside. One or two were damaged and thick jam ran from their wounds.

In the bakehouse she asked: 'What about breakfast?'

He pointed to her damaged pastries which he had discovered and brought in. 'Clear your rubbish up,' he sneered. 'And be quick!'

She snatched a roll. An oath was flung at her, but a moment later he shuffled off again, stuffing the pastries greedily into his own mouth. As she stood there eating tastelessly, a grey light began to penetrate the floury windows, and she heard some sparrows set up a confusion on the roofs outside. But the signs of dawn only seemed to increase her aversion against the day which seemed to stretch endlessly before her.

Less than an hour later they drove off through the grey light of the street. The dawn had still not come. The long, continuous procession of vehicles was still phantomlike, the singing sound of its wheels mysterious, and its figures like a crowd of fleeing refugees. Only the bluff hails of the men and the shrill shouts of the women and children revealed their destination.

'Burton Fair again! Burton Fair!'

'By God, the years roll round!'

Often the baker would join in with hoarse, croaking greetings to his friends. At his side, however, Janet never spoke, but locked her arms across her breast and tried to keep from shivering. As they drove on the chill air began to awaken her hunger and sometimes, when the horse fell into a walk, she would catch the sweet smell of warm bread still rising from the cart beneath. But she said nothing. The sensation of hunger grew into a pain. She began to wish she had eaten greedily, like her husband, but she remembered the long hours of twisting, weighing, and twisting the dough until midnight and recalled her sickness at the sight and touch

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of the rows and rows of pale, unbaked shapes that were to be sold at the fair on the following day.

Once she fell into a doze, but her hunger woke her again. When she looked around she saw that the sun had risen. The long line of vehicles had put out its lights while she slept. And on the grasses and wheat-ears, over the waving red oat-stalks, on the spiders' threads in the hedges, and dripping from the trees, everywhere she could see the heavy dew shimmering exquisitely. Overhead the larks were singing. Along the hedge-sides blackbirds squawked in terror, brushing off the dew with their wings. And whenever she bent her head against the breeze made by the motion of the cart, she could feel a faint mist settling in cool dampness on her face and hair.

A long hill, arched by great beeches and elms, came into sight. She watched the thin dark line of carts climbing it laboriously. On the nearer vehicles she could see the ribbons on the horses and women begin to sag listlessly, without a flutter, as the horses slowed down. Under the trees there was no wind. The thick roof of leaves rustled with the sound of wheels grinding, and of voices chattering gaily, and the sun threw stripes of gold between the trees on the glittering harness and the bright heads of the women.

She suffered the climb in silence. The hill seemed interminable. All the horses blew out great rays of cloudy breath and panted heavily. Then, just as it seemed they would never reach the top, she was conscious of something green flashing by, mounting the hill like an arrow. Like her, every one followed with astonishment the course of that bright green trap, ascending effortlessly. The ring of its horse's hoofs was like the crack of bullets in a quiet wood. The whisper travelled along the line like a spark:

'It's Sinclair. It's Sinclair!'

Janet held her breath. The spot of green rose higher, flashing in the sunshine, never slackening, until the vast

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cluster of trees at the summit took it into its breast. Around her the chatter of the women and children went on. Those who had come farthest began to eat bread and meat and pils. Sometimes a bottle, poised motionlessly, would catch the sunlight and glitter like a star. The baker stuffed his mouth with bread again. To his grunts of invitation she shook her head vehemently. It was as if in its breathless passage up the hill the green trap had snatched away her hunger like a thief.

For the rest of the journey she did not speak. Her eyes remained staring ahead, as if she had some grievance with the horizon already shimmering with heat.

By noon they had erected their stall in the fairground. The great spiral brasses of the shows glared fiercely in the sun. The sky, like a hard blue gem, seemed to imprison the heat beneath itself. From the earth rose a dust of cinders and fine straw, thick with the smell of paraffin oil, which began to settle on the stacks of bread and pastry under the awning. In the relentless blue heat of afternoon Janet and her husband worked on and on, selling desperately. The very breath of the man, hissing quickly, seemed avaricious.

'Wish we'd baked more. Wish we'd baked more,' he whispered.

She flung a handful of coins into a bowl and bit her lips in silence.

'Wish we'd baked more,' the voice hissed on, 'wish we'd baked more.'

Sweat whisked from his forehead when he leaned forward, falling on the bread in shining golden drops, like sovereigns. The bowl grew heavy with money. The sight of its immense pool of silver and copper dazzled her. Filling up the empty spaces in the black trays she glared bitterly at the streak of sunlight just edging across them, the first timorous hint of evening. It crawled slowly as if sick of its own heat.

Then into that oppressiveness fell a vision of the green trap dashing up the long, tiring hillside. A breath of the

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fresh summer dawn seemed to rush under the awning, revolutionising her whole expression, and for a moment giving her an air of girlish expectancy and grace. Then at her side her husband rubbed his hands noisily and said:

'Ah! Ah! A-a-a-ah!'

It was his harvest. Her own visions succumbed beneath its weight without a murmur.

Evening came at last. A double paraffin lamp shot out its smoky flame over some red-and-white game of chance long before it was dark. In the still, light air it burned steadily. It was a sign of opulence. By and by others flashed out, too. Some magic flung a dazzling circlet of blue, green and red and gold about the shadowy head of a great round-about. A siren screamed into the sky, as if proclaiming that miracle of wonder. The harsh, returning echo seemed to bring down the twilight.

The baker tried to light his own battered lamp, but a fierce blue flame darted out at him like a snake and he gave up the attempt with the words:

'See well enough, can't we? See by the lights each side. Plenty of light.'

And when she complained that she had difficulty in seeing the change, he snarled: 'Paraffin might drop on the bread. Might ruin us. I can see—surely you can.'

His harvest went on. In the three years of her married life with him there had been no better. He gloated over the diminishing heaps of bread, over the pool of silver and copper in the bowl, over everything that passed through his hands. His only regret was a constant hissing through his teeth: 'Wish we'd baked more. Wish we'd baked more.'

Suddenly she missed the sound of his voice. She discovered herself alone in the stall. Lifting the flap of the awning she called 'Jack! Jack!' in the direction of the cart, but he did not come. She called again. Sitting down on a box she resigned herself after the bitter reflection:

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'It happened last year. The old story.'

She ate a piece of bread and took a drink of stale water from the bucket under the counter. Too tired to light the lamp, she watched the bright river of faces moving tumultuously past her. The last of the pastries vanished. The single remaining roll she tried to eat, but it fell from her hands into the bucket, floating there forlornly. She sat staring at it, astounded at her own wastefulness. Fear swept over her face, then regret, then suddenly and without warning, that same joyous grace of once earlier in the day, transforming her as the dew had transformed the oat-stalks, the grasses, the leaves and even the stones in the sunny dawn. Her hands played restlessly across her breast, as if solacing some painful ecstasy there. Her head dropped to her hands and both became still, as if she were lost in the remembrance of an immense wonder.

Aroused at last by the sound of a voice, she could not immediately banish this frame of mind. The brassy jangle of the organs reasserted itself like a pain. There seemed to her no reason why she should suffer its infliction, why she should relinquish her moments of poignant reflection, even why she should answer the voice asking questions above her head.

Nevertheless she raised her head at last. For a moment she did not move again. Then she stumbled against the bowl of money as she got up hastily and gestured pitifully to the figure of Sinclair asking for bread.

Her voice was a whisper: 'We've sold it all.'

'All? But you can find me something?'

She shook her head with a wan smile. They stood looking at each other, Janet's eyes uneasy, the man's in a profound stare fixed on her face. Then a whisper passed between them:

'Where is he?'

Her hands sprang to her mouth, as if to suppress a cry.

'He's gone—he's gone somewhere. Do you want him? Why do you ask?'

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In answer he beat a perplexed tattoo on one of the trays with his swagger-cane. His eyes lowered. At once her own swept up and fed on the changing expressions of his face, on his piercing eyes. Next moment he glanced up and caught her fully in this excited act. Her glance fell at once to his breast, to the smart check of the coat, the tip of the yellow bandana peeping from the pocket, the gold scarf-pin, to a medal for shooting on his watch-chain, and to his brown muscular fingers.

'You say you've no bread?'

'It's all gone.'

'And your husband—he's gone too?'

'Yes.'

His glance swept in a half circle towards the lights. She saw their reflections run in a coloured panorama across its black eyes. Suddenly they swung back and stopped, utterly motionless, transfixed, as if fascinated, by some magical thread in the coarse grey awning hung just behind her head. He bombarded her with a fusillade of whispers, of which the last seemed to strike her with deadly effect:

'You have not forgotten?'

Her lips hung a little apart, poignant, perplexed. The word 'forgotten' burned in her head, actually as she imagined a bullet would have done. Its painfulness, sometimes usually warm, at others stabbing violently, left her utterly still. The jingle of mechanical music reached her as the sound of a hymn might reach a dying man—the faint remembrance of a detached existence, irritable, pointless, remote.

She snatched up a roll of striped awning suddenly, holding it across her breast, as if for protection.

He caught the words 'Impossible—going to shut up—a long journey.'

She vanished. Reappearing, she stretched out the canvas and hung it across the front of the stall. Her actions, quick, unpremeditated, flabbergasted him. His hands hung motion-

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lessly at his side. She muttered disjointed things: 'Close—be here half the night—dark.'

And within the stall, where he found himself following her irresistibly, there was literally darkness like the strange dense air of just before dawn, still, expectant, inscrutable.

And there was the smell of paraffin which he forgot abruptly in locating her figure. A heavy jingle of money reached him. With outstretched fingers he groped towards it. 'Janet! Janet!'

She sat on the box at his feet and buried her face in her hands. 'Oh, if you knew what it was like! I'm tired. Last night I didn't go to bed until twelve, and this morning I got up in darkness. And the heat this afternoon!

She poured out her grief, quietly, regretfully, into his breast, talking about the dreariness, the drudgery, the mournfulness of her life in that oppressive bakehouse, the avariciousness of her husband, overwhelming him with secret confidences, the full, unrestrained speech of a woman suddenly aroused to the magnanimity and wonder of a past lover. And gradually her head sank to his breast. There she could smell the fine freshness of his clothes, feel the coolness of the watch-chain against her neck, and hear even the thump of his heart and the tick of the minutes. And it seemed, as he caressed her listless head, that their love-affair of three or four years before was the only decent, beautiful thing in her life, and her quarrel with him and her marriage, in a fit of desperation and spite, to the baker, the most foolish and deadly. She remembered how he had lavished gifts upon her, given her books to read, made her sing, until it seemed that she would become a cultured, refined and beautiful woman. But now she had forgotten the songs, had no time to read anything, and never went anywhere. She remembered, too, and with silent bursts of ecstasy like those of the earlier day, evenings on his farm, afternoons in the wood, by the river, and a single Easter Sunday when they had lolled all day under

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the damson-trees, just coming out in blossom, in his long orchard sloping towards the sun, listening to each other's voices, with the larks keeping up a perpetual anthem far up in the serene sky; and Amos, the old servant, had brought food to her very lap, and talked to her about her mother.

Now in the gloominess of the shut-in stall, she let him embrace and kiss her. She could not remember when she had been kissed last, and she held his head against hers for a long time.

At last the thought of the baker brought them both to their feet.

'He'll have to be found,' she said. 'I'll get the money together. Go and harness the horse.'

They rode out of the fairground in silence, Sinclair driving. Up the wide streets of the town swam dark streams of people. In the market square a torchlight procession was forming up, throwing a smoky light into the windows and on the bright faces of the girls and their men. Above them gaudy strings of triangular flags dipped from tree to tree. Noisy crowds of men and women sat drinking beer in the sultry air outside the inns. Now and then a rocket would scratch the black summer sky with its swift white point before bursting into green and vermilion stars.

The baker was sprawled across a table under an inn archway when they found him. His head rested calmly in a pool of beer. Some one had crowned him with a straw hat no bigger than a saucer, and an arrogant blue feather was stuck in his button-hole. As Janet approached, a white-faced barmaid lifted up his head, wiped away the beer with a towel, then let it fall again and vanished with the air of one having performed the last rites.

'Who's that?' mumbled the baker. 'Eh?'

'It's Janet.'

'Come take me home!' he muttered.

'Yes.'

THE BAKER'S WIFE

'You're a good gal. You're a good gal. You are.' He groped unsuccessfully for her arm. 'You catch hold of me arm, catch hold, good gal; can't manage without—catch hold! Got th' money? That's all right. Bit dark now, now ain't it? Catch hold. Good gal.'

'It's a long journey. Mind the step.'

They pushed him up into the trap. He sank down without grace or spirit, silent except for a groan or two.

She whispered to Sinclair when he began to condole with her. 'It happened last year, and the year before. He doesn't often get drunk, only now and again. That's all.'

The sorrowfulness of the words seemed to pass into her eyes and reflect itself in his face.

'You can't do anything.' Suddenly she caught his sleeve, and poured out a torrent of beseeching whispers: 'Now go away. Go away. I can't bear to see you stand there looking as if you'd lost something. Go away. It's a long journey, and we must go. He'll sleep all the way home, and I shall think of nothing but you.'

'Every day I walk in the woods——'

She muttered as when they had first met: 'Impossible—work, work—I could never come. It's all over.'

'Forgive me.'

Her lips parted. Astonishment made her eyes larger and more beautiful. 'Don't speak like that.' Her words became disjointed again. 'It's too late, it's awful, everything's gone, it's lost, there's nothing.'

'I could give you anything, I'll send you things——'

She sprang up into the cart and drove away with feverish haste among the crowd, past the torchlight procession, and clear of the town. In the cool night air her husband fell into a doze. The image of Sinclair, as she had last seen him, troubled and pained in the glow of the inn lights, travelled with her like the sound of the horse's feet. Glancing back at the great circle of light lying in a soft arch over the town,

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she remembered the clean smell of his clothes, the tick of his watch, the panorama of lights in his eyes and his attentive silence to all the outpouring of her grief. She recalled, too, their quarrel, its tragically insignificant cause—a swift word or two, the Easter day beneath the damson-trees, and all her life of three, four and five years past.

The click-click of one of her husband's feet against an iron fitting woke her from her remembrances. At the sound her anger woke too: anger against the meanness and pettiness of her existence, against the baker, the low, oppressive bakehouse, against the long road ahead and against herself for having married him. She lashed the horse in her rage. It sprang forward as if shot. Her husband's head sank lower on his breast with a groan. At the head of the hill a great mass of trees took them swiftly into its bosom. The ping of the lash on the horse's flank gave her a sort of fierce joy, and they flew down the hill as Sinclair had flown up it in the morning. Her hair unloosed itself and blew across her eyes. She drove half-blindly. Stones lying in the road shot away as if terrified; and terror began to shine in her own eyes, too, until nothing mattered except her anger and remorse.

Then, as they dashed and lurched across a great curve over the brook at the bottom, her husband moved his head and muttered:

'What's matter? What's the matter? Careful!—upset the blasted lot, upset the blasted lot!'

She tried to steady the horse. What had he said? Upset them? The reins tightened in her hands. Upset them? Her anger, abating suddenly, left her with a clear, dispassionate view of what might have happened, a vision of his young, dead face, reproachful, pitiful even in its avariciousness, the blood pouring from his temples into his eyes which she had once imagined kind, drowning their light; and then she saw by contrast, steadily and without emotion, what

THE BAKER'S WIFE

must go on—that for perhaps another thirty, forty, or even fifty years she must live and work and care for the thing lying at her side.

And suddenly the tears streamed down her face, and bending her head under the weight of her grief she began to drive slowly, the reins tight in her hands.

THE CHILD

IN colour the sea was of the grey-green of a thistle leaf in summer, though sometimes were revealed patches of dull violet, brief, evanescent patches that were without the dancing white veins of the rest of the sea. In the foreground, on the pale-red shore, the green and violet and white merged into long lines of miniature breakers that kept up a soft thunder.

A row of bathing-tents between the cliffs and the waves were striped red and white. Up on the little yellow cliff the sunblinds of the house were barred red and white also. A faint wind coming with the sun blew out the tamarisk foliage as it would feathers, and mingled softly the scent of sea and greenness and shore.

The wind flapped lazily at the awning of the window where the child stood. The child was perching on a stool and the stool had been set on two volumes of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, so that the child could survey the world.

From the window could be seen the whole sweep of the sea, the green and white and violet, with a thin strip of pale beaten shore. Watching it the child had ecstatic moments when the stool swayed like the tamarisks in the wind and the child murmured:

“Oh! Lord!”

Long ago the architect of the house had inserted into the window panes of scarlet and yellow and blue. Blue squares filled the corners. Yellow oblongs united the squares. The middle had been left a pool of vivid blood. The child could therefore look out on a world more evanescent and startling in colour than ever the sea could be. Leaning forward it saw sea and rocks and sky as if washed in bloody rain; it detected and became excited at a red man escorting a red lady towards, into, and finally under a red sea; lastly it saw red boats darting hither and thither like red flies between a red shore and the thunderously red line of sky.

THE CHILD

On growing tired of a crimson world it could, by magic twists, discover a blue, in which foliage, cliffs, bathers, sea and shore would look dyed like a royal robe; so that in the garden between itself and the sea sprang forth blue pagodas, blue lawns, blue discs and trumpets of silent blue, all of a brilliant, prepossessing beauty.

Through the red pane the world appeared even in its beauty a little forbidding and dangerous, for the sea appeared always to be about to drown bathers and mariners. Through the blue glass it resembled a painted picture, and the figures that walked from the bathing-huts to the sea were queens and kings.

Gazing through them the child clutched its frock, tiptoed on the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and murmured again:

‘Oh! Lord!’

But it had no words for the scene through the yellow pane.

There the world was softened and quietened; between sky and shore there was eternal sun. The sea was a yellow pond, and in colour the sky was somewhere between the hue of a lemon and an autumn pear. Some tall grass, waving on the cliff’s edge, was like turning corn, and the bathing-huts below appeared suddenly like big lacquered carriages that had brought Chinese ladies and gentlemen to be washed in the sea.

Lazily a yellow gull dipped from the cliff to the waves. The child made precarious bends in order to watch it, wishing it would fly upwards and sun its back on the yellow sill. At the same time Volume One of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* slipped a little under its feet.

The child had still no words. In texture and warmth and hue the day beyond the yellow pane seemed to ripen. The pane itself was warm, a sunny petal, and the garden a lemon wilderness. With a start the child saw itself beyond the petal and the wilderness, dipping its feet into the soft yellow sea.

Then the child saw a party of bathers running pell-mell

THIRTY TALES

towards the sea. They appeared slightly ridiculous, but interesting, for side by side with skinny, decrepit men ran immense, magnificently bosomed women holding each other's hands. Some danced, some hopped miserably between stone and stone, others made splendid efforts to run straight into the sea. They were all yellow in colour and might have been gigantic wasps except that they shouted as they ran.

The child pressed on the yellow glass. Not all the bathers had yet reached the sea. And some who had arrived had paused on the edge and were bending forward to touch it, as if it had been a bank of yellow flowers.

Tiptoeing, the child watched carefully the fat and thin, the more athletic and the wary, as they approached the sea. Every moment the day and the sea seemed softer and riper. The bathers were steeped in sun.

Finally the child saw that only two bathers remained on the shore. One was a fat woman who, with legs apart and arms spread out like wings, was about to push an aged, thin-legged gentleman into the yellow waves. The woman pushed and struggled. All the other bathers appeared to be shouting and laughing. The thin man, waving his arms, made mock shudders and protests.

Suddenly, as if taken unawares, he joined the chaos of dancing yellow shoulders, yellow heads and ripe, yellow breasts with a splash and a shout.

Immediately all the world appeared to be gaily splashing and shouting.

Through the yellow pane the child saw all this as a picture of entrancement and delight. And it longed suddenly to emulate it, even if not to be part of it all. This longing it fulfilled at once by making swimming motions with its arms, its neck craned forward, one foot occasionally swinging free of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. It swam lustily, not moving an inch. The room was full of the confused sounds of blowings and splashings and supposedly breasted waves.

THE CHILD

Suddenly the child tired of it all. Down in the yellow ocean was such splashing and breasting and swimming as it could never hope to attain. There the fat women were wallowing like yellow fish and the waves were caressing them. For a distance of a hundred yards outward yellow heads danced in and out of view.

The child suddenly ceased its own imaginary swimming, stood still, and watched greedily.

Its longing to be part of the ripe, lemon-coloured, pear-coloured day grew greater. Its eyes grew fiercely and intensely wondrous with what it saw.

All of a sudden its hands were at its clothes. Buttons suddenly ripped away from their holes, bows flew undone and the child slid away from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and the yellow pane. Over the child's head slipped a dress and a petticoat, like skins, and a pair of little blue drawers fell noiselessly to her feet, draping the books and the stool.

Through the window the day now appeared like a strange, perfectly made jig-saw puzzle of red and yellow and blue.

Soft lights fell suddenly over the naked breast, arms and shoulders of the child. The child made no sound in the passage to the door. And on the landing and the stairs there was no sound either except of a blue fly buzzing in some sunny pane.

The stairs let the naked feet pass without a creak; the air took the child's excited, expectant breath and hushed it.

Running among the trees and flowers that had once appeared like blue pagodas and trumpets the child felt an immense elation. Her eyes were dazzled; she still saw the sea as a yellow pond, and the bathing-huts as lacquered carriages that had brought Chinese ladies and gentlemen to be washed in the sea.

She ran on. The sun was hot, the wind gentle, kissing her pink body as it kissed the tamarisk and the sea. She flaunted and swayed her body as she ran.

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Descending the steps of the cliff she came within reach of the sea. The bathers were still struggling with the waves and themselves, splashing the sea upward in silver-green bows.

Pausing, the child held her hands to her own unripened breast and watched greedily again. She could feel her heart beating; the beat was like the noise of the gently thunderous sea.

She ran suddenly forward to where the dancing shapes, the fat and thin, the more athletic and the wary, were rolling their old, white, misshapen, ill-kept, would-be seductive and repulsive bodies like hoary seals in the sun. As she ran forward she made little jubilant noises and waved her hands.

She came to within twenty feet of the sea.

Suddenly all the fat women and the thin men stood up in the water. They stared, gasped and dashed the water from their flabby eyes. The sea-drops glistened and dripped from their bedraggled limbs. And suddenly, as if ashamed of something, they all strode forward in the water, waving their fat and thin and pallid arms, gesticulating forbiddingly, making noises of horror and shame.

'Go back! Go back!' they shouted to the naked child. 'Go back!'

They shouted and continued to shout.

But towards the sea, that with its rolling yellow breast had appeared the very emblem of some bright, entrancing day, the child in its loveliness ran on.

ON THE ROAD

THE wood was flooded with April sunlight, but shallow pools of rain lay wherever there were hollows in the black earth under the oak trees. Black rings of ashes were dotted about the ground where tramps had made their fires and rested, and primroses were blooming everywhere at the feet of young hazel trees. The wind that blew the hazels with a soft sound one against another was sweet and warm and laden with the scent of the primroses. It was like the breath of a new life.

A man came into the wood from the road and strode a hundred paces into it at random among the hazel trees. He was tall and black-haired and powerfully broad at the shoulders. Except when he stooped beneath the undergrowth he carried himself superbly, with a slight swagger of his hips, holding his head high up, and sometimes throwing it slightly backward, with unconscious motions of arrogance and pride. He looked less like a tramp than a fighter, but less like a fighter than some proud sardonic Indian. His face was muscular and powerful; the skin was burnt tough and dry by the sun, and there was a glimpse of a tattoo mark of a purple and crimson flower on his naked chest. He was dressed in light brown trousers, a black jacket slung over his shoulder, a soft grey hat, and a blue shirt faded and washed to the colour of the sky. Stooping, he nicked off a primrose with a finger-nail and put the flower in his mouth. He was looking for a place to rest.

He took another twenty paces into the wood and saw the white smoke of a fire among the trees. He stopped and gazed at the smoke for one moment and then walked on. In another moment he came upon a woman and man sitting by the fire on a space of earth between a willow bush and an oak tree. The man was asleep with his head against the oak tree, and the woman was boiling a can of water on a heap of

THIRTY TALES

smoking wood. He saw a black bundle on the earth and an old perambulator pushed back against the sawlog.

He stood perfectly still and gazed at the woman without a flicker of his dark eyes. She was dressed in a short black skirt and an old stained orange-coloured jersey stretched as tight as skin over her big breasts and shoulders. Her hair was very thick and blonde, and there was something about her that recalled a lioness: the tawny eyes sleepy and rich with changing lights, the lips ripe and heavy, the large, strong face superb with its passionate languor. She had a newspaper open on her knees, but she put it down on the earth as he looked at her. Her hands were strong and handsome, and the skin was a beautiful golden colour, smooth and with tiny blonde hairs that gleamed in the sunshine.

'Sit down,' she said. She waved her hand. 'There were no rings on her fingers. Her voice was low, careless and husky.

He looked at the man lying with his head against the oak tree. She half smiled.

'He's asleep,' she said. 'He's all right. You won't wake him.'

He sat down on the black earth. He sat so that he could see both the man and the woman at one glance. In an instant he saw astounding differences between them. The man was haggard and white, and the bones of his cheeks stood out clear and sharp as knuckles under his dark eyes. His face was dirty and dissolute and strengthless, and he lay like a man who had received a stunning blow, his closed eyes dark as two deep bruises under his narrow brows. He looked as if he would never wake again, and the woman looked at him with one hasty glance of indifference, as if not caring whether he woke or not.

The water in the can began to bubble, and the woman slipped a stick under the handle and took the can from the fire. The man leaned across without hesitation and quickly shook something brown from a packet into the water.

ON THE ROAD

'You're very smart,' she flashed, looking up. 'What was that?'

He leaned over and stirred the water with the stick, which he took from her own hands. 'Coffee.'

He had spoken all the time with the primrose in his mouth, and now he leaned back and took the flower from his mouth and spat away an inch of bitten stalk and put it back again. There was something about the paleness of the primrose against his dark face that made him doubly arresting.

They stared at each other in silence, their eyes languid and bold and unflickering.

'Where are you making for?' he asked suddenly.

'Liverpool,' she said.

He looked at the perambulator. Then he glanced at her shoes. He noticed for the first time her blistered feet through the soles. He looked at her sharply.

'You're a hell of a way from Liverpool,' he said. 'A hell of a way.'

She did not answer. The smell of the coffee was strong in the wood, and there was no sound except the whistling of a blackbird and of bees booming softly in the yellow-dusty sallow blooms. She reached over to the bundle and brought out two blue enamel cups, and poured out the coffee and handed a cup to him.

'No sugar,' she said in a languid voice.

He fumbled at his pocket and brought out a packet of yellow sugar and set it on the earth between them and nodded towards the sleeping man.

'Going to wake him?' he said.

She shrugged her shoulders and tasted the coffee.

'What's wrong with him?' he said.

She crooked her elbow and smiled ironically and took a deep drink of her coffee.

'Like a fish,' she said.

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He nodded and looked at the thin white face more closely. It seemed very young.

'Twenty-five,' she said. 'And he was a fine kid. But now ——' she laid her two hands just above her breasts and shook her head.

The man took the primrose from his mouth and threw it on the earth and began to drink his coffee. The sunshine came warmly down on his face, and as he tilted back his head he felt the intent and sleepy gaze of the woman on his face too.

'Where are you going yourself?' she said.

He finished drinking and wiped his lips, and stared at her boldly, admiring her.

'I want to get to Bristol and find a ship and get to Valparaiso,' he said. 'I'm sick of this country. I used to know a man in Valparaiso. I made some money there at one time.'

She nodded her head and took another drink of her coffee and repeated thoughtfully:

'Valparaiso.'

He drained his coffee and spat the grounds from his mouth and leaned back on one elbow. The place where they were sitting was for a space of a foot or two without shadow, and the spring sunshine poured full on the woman's head, so that her hair seemed more than ever golden and the strength and passion in her face finer in the yellow light. The old orange jersey had a row of buttons at the breast, but the first was missing and the second had slipped from its button-hole. Her breast gleamed soft and fair against the dirty orange stuff, and half unconsciously her hand moved and she did up the button afresh. But when her hand dropped back to her knees the swelling of her breast burst it apart again.

'What's it like in a place like Valparaiso?' she said suddenly.

'You know as well as I do.'

She nodded.

'If the good God just thinks fit it can be wonderful,' he

ON THE ROAD

went on. 'In one month in Valparaiso I made five hundred pounds. And easy too. I made it too easy. I wasn't satisfied. I thought I could go down to Buenos Aires and make a lot more. I lost every penny in a fortnight. Then I went up to Panama and on to Cuba and over to San Francisco. I made a bit of money sometimes, but I could never keep it long. Now I want to get back to Valparaiso. But if things go wrong I dare say I shall want to get back here again.'

His voice was deep and easy and there was something nonchalant and ironical and dreamy about his words. The woman sat watching him with an expression of undisguised intensity, contemplating his dark face with a marvellous steadiness of her sleepy eyes, lost in thought. She seemed in that moment extraordinarily young, her face transformed by a moment of the strangest rapture. She looked at him candidly and enviously, and then suddenly with a glance of full-blooded passion too, her eyes wide and perfectly child-like, her bosom falling and heaving rapidly.

They sat for a moment and watched each other again like two animals. His lips gradually assumed a little sardonic smile, but she never changed her expression of marvellous intensity. The sun was warming the primroses and the fallow bloom, and the air was filled with the soft scents of them, the smell of wood smoke and the strong odour of earth.

The man beneath the tree stirred suddenly in his sleep and began to breathe heavily, like someone drunk, without waking.

The sound upset the woman. In a moment the fine expression on her face was lost. The sardonic, dreamy smile vanished from the lips of the man too. He stood up.

'I'll push on,' he said.

The woman rose to her feet also and stretched her arms over her head with a motion of weariness. In the moment that the orange jersey and the black skirt were pulled skin-tight over her rigid body he saw that she was pregnant.

THIRTY TALES

She lowered her arms with a sigh, her magnificent body all languorous and heavy with its burden of strength and life. She yawned, and then smiled at him when she had finished the yawn.

'You're not so very old?' he said.

'Twenty-nine.'

'And some,' he guessed ironically.

'No.' She shook her head. 'Twenty-nine.'

'I believe you,' he said.

He looked straight into her eyes and nodded, thinking for one moment of the sleepy man, the perambulator, her shoes, her lacerated feet and her pregnancy. She returned his look with some of the old intensity, but now as though she were thinking of something else, very far away.

'Well, I'll get,' he said. 'What'll you do if you get to Liverpool?'

She lifted her face a fraction towards the sun and shook her head. Instantly he turned away his head, as if he regretted bitterly having spoken.

'So long. Good luck for Valparaiso,' she said.

'So long,' he said. 'Good luck for Liverpool.'

They looked at each other for a single instant, and something warm and tender flashed between them before he turned away and began to stride through the wood towards the road.

The wands of the hazel trees kept whipping back as he passed, and the pollen was shaken from the thick catkin, and a golden dust came falling through the beams of sunlight slanting between the trees. The sound of the swaying branches and cracking whips grew rapidly farther and farther away, and the hazel trees trembled less and less and finally became still again. The woman sat down, rested her face in her hands and stared in thought at the primroses and the sleeping man. The last of the branches swayed to rest in its place again and the wood was silent.

BLOSSOMS

EVERY morning, except in treacherous weather, Francie got on her bicycle and rode a distance of more than two miles to the town in order to take her son to school. She was a widow, undersized and puffed out with stoutness. But in spite of this she rode always with her shoulders squarely braced, gripping the handle-bars tightly, her forefingers extended rigidly downward towards the brakes, her knees bobbing up and down like two little pistons under her skirts. About her floppy waist were fastened, tightly also, the fingers of her son, dangling between the saddle and the wheel like a frightened fly.

The journey began from the top of a hill on which sat a row of new villas blinking red and white in the sun. From the moment Francie skipped awkwardly into the saddle the bicycle flew, gathering speed recklessly, creaking under its double weight, ticking excitedly, spurting up fierce, whirring dust into the flashing wheels. The wind made a swoop up the hill like an excited boy. Her skirts laughed against her legs. Her breath ebbed away in fluttering little waves. Trees lumbered past, and between them and the road raced the grass in two never-dying ribbons of bright green fire.

Then, half way down, with a fear of calamity encircling her breast like a cold band, she would set her teeth and put on the brakes. The sound made was as if many matches were being struck against the wheels. Then carefully, sometimes tremblingly, she released them again, and the bicycle glided with its heavy load into the safety of the level avenue of trees below.

Francie loved the thrilling wind in her skirts, the flashing grass, the tick of the bicycle, and in a squeakily excited voice she would pant out:

'How did you like that? Wasn't that lovely? You're holding on tight, aren't you? That's right then!'

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Behind her the boy clung like some tiny parasite, frightened to stir, staring with dull, stupid eyes which seemed to be smeared with a sort of dark bloom, reflecting nothing. Only by tightened fingers would he acknowledge her words.

Once again, at this, his mother would experience a proud, thrilling pleasure. Up towards the great trees she would turn her round, sweetish face and sigh.

One spring morning, on the road under the trees, lay sprinkled soft, reddish dust. It crouched in little heaps under the fringe of grass and peppered the grass itself. The boy, timid and dull, gazed at it and then asked:

'What is it, Mother? Where has it come from?'

Dropping her head a little to one side Francie smiled and told him: 'The elms are coming into blossom, darling. First of all they come out furry and red, like this. Then in a little while they turn and change pale green. Then the leaves come.'

The bicycle sailed on a long way. Then the boy said:

'Why do they?'

And while she pedalled unceasingly on, her fat legs pumping monotonously beneath her skirt, she would talk to him without turning her head, telling him all she knew of the trees breaking into blossom, and along the roadside point out other trees, the poplars like vain, quivering steeples, the slumberous oaks and beeches, the dark, grave pines and soft firs, and the silver birches hanging their heads.

She would speak to him with soft simplicity, sensitively, so that sometimes the fingers about her waist would seem to tighten about her heart too. And all the time the boy would answer with grave monosyllables, as if confused even by her words.

From the avenue they rode into clear, green space, and thence into the town. Through the streets they glided serenely, like a balloon on wheels, past other children, Francie with her simple, moon-like face looking neither to

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right nor left, the boy resting stupidly one frightened cheek on the back of her tender body. Sometimes the children, from the pavement, would flutter amusement, but Francie and the boy never turned their heads, and the front wheel of the bicycle never wavered.

At the school she alighted, wheeled the boy to the gates, and lifting him off with one arm, pressed her noisy, damp lips to his cheeks and began flabbily to wave her hand to him.

'Good-bye—be careful! Good-bye, good-bye!' she sang, 'good-bye!'

Her eyes pondered over his going. After his disappearance she wheeled the bicycle off, frisked, wriggled and, finding the saddle at last, methodically began the journey back again. As far as the hill her knees pumped indefatigably, her skirts kept up their soft flutter, and the bicycle its furious ticking. Every morning, however, at the foot of the hill, she skipped off, and a little breathless, began to walk.

As she climbed the hill, her stout figure leaning on the machine, she would recall the moment when she and the boy had sped recklessly the other way, both dumb with excitement and fear, and would sometimes imagine she felt his half terrified fingers still sticking like blunt claws into her side. And then she would recall his face, in reality stupid, unenlightened and mute, but to her so simply and eloquently beautiful, so much more than a face, that she did not see it, but felt it softly at her breast like an emotion.

His questions about the trees and flowers she recollected too. All the thoughts which in his stupidity he had not expressed she shaped for herself in her heart, as she might imagine the soft shades of unopened flowers.

And she felt that as she would wait for the elms to flower, snow down their redness, scatter their green and be draped in leaves at last, so she was waiting for his changes, his blossoming. And she doted constantly over what this blossom-

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ing should bring, seeing him no longer as a frightened, questioning mite carried on her bicycle, but as a youth, strong, virtuous, and clever, and as a man, throwing unconsciously over her the mellow shadow of maturity.

Sometimes, if she reflected thus, the ascent of the hill would seem over in a second, and almost before aware of it she would find herself pushing open the swinging white gate, wheeling the bicycle past the snaky crocus borders, and resting it against the wall.

On the wall, under the south sky, had been set a plum-tree, crucified like some weak, lank spider. Francie had planted it for the boy's birthday. She cared lavishly for it. Every morning she set the bicycle clear of it, and when she saw it was needed, broke off dead twigs and nailed up loose ones, as if to crucify it yet more securely.

Here, as when on the bicycle and when struggling up the hill, she dwelt on her devotion to the boy, her face like some large pink and white melon, shining at the thought of him. Like his, her eyes glowed as if clouded with bloom. Sometimes about the house she sang with a soft, floating soprano, and would be reminded then of the days when she had really sung, taking the solo parts in oratorio, and singing once at the Crystal Palace, in London, in a choir of five thousand voices. Then it would be her fervent wish that the boy might become a singer, too.

After this she thought: 'Soon I ought to have his voice tested. I must let someone hear it! I must think of his future.

One night, before tenderly pressing his head into the warm camphor-smelling pillow, she actually took courage and asked him to sing.

He raised his head and stared. 'Sing?' His eyes gleamed duller than ever with their sombre bloom. 'Why must I?'

'I want to hear you—for something. Sing, my darling! Then some day perhaps you will sing in opera, or at least

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like mummy did, in London, in a choir of five thousand people! And mummy would like that.'

But the boy put his face to the pillow and pouted his fat lips, oozing stupidity. Francie rested her flabby cheeks on his and kissed him slobberingly, and when he had gone to sleep wept over him for both misery and joy.

In the morning, however, as they flew down the hill, she sang tremulously, like a bird wondering if spring has come, the notes of her soft, reedy soprano floating in the air like irresponsible feathers. Above her the sky curved gently and softly, resting itself like a giant blue petal on the green rims of the wide, sunny world. Larks sang everywhere and she thought: 'How happy I am!' This morning she did not put on the brakes. The bicycle swooped like an arrow into the soft drifts of elm-blossom under the trees.

There again the boy asked: 'What is it? I forgot what you said.'

She almost sang in reply: 'The elms are coming into blossom! I told you yesterday! Into blossom, into flower!'

The bicycle sailed on, and then again his voice asked: 'Why do they?'

But to all his stupidity and forgetfulness she was tenderly blind, once again imagining all the things he might have said, her thoughts coloured like flowers. When returning she lifted her face to the spring sky, drank from its cascade of sweet, gold spice, and felt within her the soul of the boy softly move, gladden and blossom with her own.

Then, soon afterwards, in the avenue, the elms, instead of red blossom, began to shower down their second flowers, like a storm of green confetti. Every day Francie told the boy what this meant, and showed him also the poplars and elms, the oaks and beeches, the birches and pines. And every night, into his stupid face she put her own, simple, moon-like and soft, and whispered:

THIRTY TALES

'Sing, my darling. Some day you may sing in opera, in a big hall, or like mummy did, in a choir so big no one will know who you are.'

And in the avenue the poplars became swaying steeples of green, stroking the sky, and on the south wall, crucified in the sun, the plum-tree stirred itself, wakened, and softly burst into a blossom of silky stars.

THE FLAME

'Two ham and tongue, two teas, please, Miss!'

'Yessir.'

The waitress retreated, noticing as she did so that the clock stood at six. 'Two ham and tongue, two teas,' she called down the speaking-tube. The order was repeated. She put down the tube, seemed satisfied, even bored, and patted the white frilled cap that kept her black hair in place. Then she stood still, hand on hip, pensively watching the door. The door opened and shut.

She thought: 'Them two again!'

Wriggling herself upright she went across and stood by the middle-aged men. One smiled and the other said 'Usual.'

Down the tube went her monotonous message: 'Onc ham, one tongue, two teas.'

Her hand went to her hip again, and she gazed at the clock. Five past!—time was hanging, she thought. Her face grew pensive again. The first order came on the lift, and the voice up the tube: 'Two 'am an' tongue, two teas!'

'Right.' She took the tray and deposited it with a man and woman at a corner-table. On returning she was idle again, her eyes still on the door. Her ear detected the sound of a bronchial wheeze on the floor above, the angry voice of a customer in the next section, and the rumble of the lift coming up. But she watched the door until the last possible second. The tray slid into her hand almost without her knowing it and the nasal voice into her ear: 'One 'am, one tongue, two teas!'

'Right.'

The middle-aged customers smiled; one nudged the other when she failed to acknowledge that salute, and chirped 'Bright to-day, ain't you!'

She turned her back on him.

THIRTY TALES

'Been brighter,' she said.

She was tired. When she leant against the head of the lift she shut her eyes, then remembered and opened them again to resume her watch on the door and clock. The man in the corner smacked his lips, drank with his mouth full and nearly choked. A girl in another corner laughed, not at the choking man but at her companion looking cross-eyed. The cash-register 'tinked' sharply. Someone went out: nothing but fog came in, making everyone shiver. The man in the corner whistled three or four notes to show his discomfort, remembered himself, and began to eat his ham.

The girl noticed these things mechanically, not troubling to show her disgust. Her eye remained on the door. A customer came in, an uninteresting working girl who stared, hesitated, then went and sat out of the dark girl's section. The dark girl noticed it mechanically.

The manageress came: tall, darkly dressed, with long sleeves, like a manageress.

'Have you had your tea, Miss Palmer?' she asked.

'No.'

'Would you like it?'

'No, thank you.'

'No? Why not?'

'It's my night off. I'm due out at half past.'

She walked away, took an order, answered a call for 'Bill!' and found that the order got mixed with the bill, and that the figures wouldn't add. It seemed years before the 'tink' of the register put an end to confusion. The customer went out: fog blew in; people shivered. The couple in the corner sipped their tea, making little storms in their tea-cups.

She put her head against the lift. The clock showed a quarter past: another quarter of an hour! She was hungry. As if in consequence her brain seemed doubly sharp and she

THE FLAME

kept thinking: 'My night out. Wednesday. Wednesday. He said Wednesday! He said——'

'Bill! Bill!'

She went about mechanically, listened mechanically, executed mechanically. A difficult bill nearly sent her mad, but she wrote mechanically, cleaned away dirty platter, brushed off crumbs—all mechanically. Now and then she watched the clock. Five minutes more! Would he come? Would he? Had he said Wednesday?

The waitress from the next section, a fair girl, came and said:

'Swap me your night, Lil? Got a flame comin' in. I couldn't get across to tell you before. A real flame—strite he is—nice, quiet, 'andsome. Be a dear? You don't care?'

The dark girl stared. What was this! She couldn't! Not she! The clock showed three minutes to go. She couldn't!

'Nothing doing,' she said and walked away.

Everyone was eating contentedly. In the shadow near the lift she pulled out his note and read: 'I will come for you, Wednesday evening, 6.'

Six! Then he was late! Six! Why should she think half past? She shut her eyes. Then he wasn't coming!

A clock outside struck the half-hour. She waited five minutes before passing down the room, more mechanically than ever. Why hadn't he come? Why hadn't he come?

The fair girl met her. 'Be a dear,' she pleaded. 'Swap me your night. He's a real flame—'struth he is, nice, quiet!'

Thirty-five minutes late! The dark girl watched the door. No sign! It was all over.

'Right-o,' she said.

She sent another order down. The door opened often now, the fog was thicker, she moved busily. She thought of him when a man ordered a brandy and spilt it over her hand

THIRTY TALES

because his own shivered with cold. He wasn't like that, she thought, as she sucked her fingers dry.

For the first time in five minutes she looked at the door. She felt her heart leap.

He had come at last. Yes, there he was. He was talking to the fair girl. The little doll was close to him. Yes, there he was, nice, quiet, handsome. Their voices crept across to her.

'Two seats? Two seats?' she heard.

'Yes.'

'Oh! I say! And supper?'

'Of course. And supper.'

The dark girl could not move as they went out.

The door shut hard. 'Two seats?' 'And supper?' 'Nice, quiet, 'andsome.' The dark girl dreamed on.

'Miss! Miss!'

She obeyed. She was sad, hungry, tired.

'Yessir?' They were middle-aged men again.

'Two teas, two tongues,' said one.

'Two seats and supper?' she whispered.

'Whaaat? Two teas! two tongues! Can't you hear?'

'Yessir. Two teas, two tongues. Thank you, sir.'

She moved slowly away.

'You can never make these blooming gals understand,' said one man to the other.

FEAR

ON the horizon three separate thunderstorms talked darkly to each other.

The hut where little Richard and his grandfather had taken shelter was already green with darkness, its air stifling and warm, and the trees that surrounded it purple and heavy with whispers. When the boy heard sounds coming from the wood he would turn upwards a pair of great eyes, faint-yellow with fear, and ask in an awed voice:

'What's the matter, Grandfather? What makes it dark?'

At one time the man would scratch his beard and say nothing, at another grunt and say, 'Don't you worry yourself,' and at another, 'You ain't frightened are you? You're too big a boy to be frightened. You sit still. You'll wear your breeches out.'

But the child would never cease to cast his great swollen eyes about the hut, fidget on trembling haunches and show that he was afraid of the dark and oppressive silence and the growls of thunder which dropped into it, reminding him dreadfully of the voices of cows and dogs. So he saw nothing tiresome in repeating:

'What's the matter, Grandfather? What makes it dark?'

Each time he said this it seemed that there was less to be seen in the hut, and not much outside either, where the three thunderstorms grew angrier and angrier with each other, and that in the wood the trees were beginning to open their arms in readiness to catch the approaching rain. And when this did not come the old man wetted his soft lips, told the boy he would sing him something and began a ballad.

Beyond the first note or two, however, the boy did not listen, and in a few moments the thin tune gave up its exploration of the stagnant air and the man said again:

'You sit still. There's nothing to hurt.'

'What's it dark for then?' persisted the boy.

THIRTY TALES

'It's going to rain.'

He could not understand this.

'Yesterday it rained and the sun shone,' he said. 'Why doesn't the sun shine now?'

'The sun ain't here.'

'Where's it gone?' he asked.

'Don't you worry.'

And again it thundered. The boy could scarcely see his grandfather, and when all was silent he went to the door and peered out. Coming back he caught a smell like bad fish from the dirty floor of the hut, wondering why it smelt like that. Before long began to cry.

'What makes the sky green?' he asked.

'It ain't green!' his grandfather declared.

'It is,' he persisted, blubbing. 'It's green like Nancy's hat. What makes it green?'

'It's going to rain,' was the answer. 'That's all. You be quiet.'

He wept again in reply. As he looked up through the window the film of his tears made it seem as if the black sky was pushing the trees down on the hut and that before very long would crush it and bury him. 'I want to go home,' he whispered, but the man did not answer, and for a long while there was a sultry silence. The boy felt himself sweating. He could not see his grandfather and wanted to find him desperately but dare not move an inch. And as he stood there it began to rain, at first desultorily, then thickly and with a great hissing sound.

'Grandfather! Grandfather!' He wept and ran at last between the man's dark knees. 'Grandfather!' he whimpered.

There were sleepy grunts in reply.

'Wake up!' the little one whispered. 'It's raining. I want to go home. Wake up!'

When the old man aroused himself it was to hear immense

FEAR

shaking rolls of thunder, the boy's voice in tears and the rain throwing itself against the window in a sort of grey passion.

'I want to go home!' the boy cried. 'It's night. Mamma'll have gone to bed.'

'You be quiet,' comforted the man. 'It ain't night.'

'Then what time is it?'

Like a white eye a watch came out in the gloom, a bluish match-flame spurted over it and for a minute the boy was unafraid, gazed awfully at the leaf-shaped light, its reflections on his grandfather's face, the watch and the roof of the hut and forgot the storm and his fear.

'It's only eight o'clock,' his grandfather growled without ill-will. 'You sit quiet.'

But at that moment the flame seemed to get swallowed by the darkness, and as if by some malicious miracle next moment appear again in a frenzied light that gave the sky a yellow wound which in turn spilt yellow blood on the wood and the dark floor of the hut. There came thunder, as if a great beast sat roaring on the roof. The hot peaceable air seemed to cry out like a sensitive child, the trees were distressed, the great confusion made the boy's head thick and hot with terror.

He buried his head in the friendly cavern between the man's thighs and there groaned and wept in darkness.

And as the thunder and lightning made their terrifying duct above his head, he tried to think of his home, his mother's cool face, the windows where there were blinds and harmless moths, but he managed it all vaguely and felt that what prevented him was the storm, which was something black and cunning and old, and against which he had no chance. Only if he remained half-eaten up by the shadows and were mistaken for a dog or sack might he perhaps escape. And so he crouched there, very still, trying not to listen, but hearing everything in a greater tumult than ever, and knew that the storm went on without heeding his fear.

THIRTY TALES

Nearly an hour passed: often the boy wanted to cry out, but felt as if choked by fear and darkness and kept silent. His knees grew cold, one leg fell into a tingling sleep, only his head was warm and throbbed madly like an old clock. Once there was a smell of burning from the wood, but it passed, and the boy forgot it in wondering if animals were terrified as he was, and where all the birds had gone and why they were silent. Then by some lucky chance he caught the silvery ticks of his grandfather's watch and was comforted.

So it grew quiet and a clear darkness came. The boy got up and opened his eyes. The rain no longer growled, and soon the thunder passed off. Outside the cobwebs hung like ropes of leaden beads and the ground was covered with great shadow-printed pools over which the man lifted the boy. From the edge of the wood were visible the blue storms, retreated far off in a mist, and a star or two in the course they had used.

'There's the cuckoo!' the man said.

It was true, and as the boy listened he forgot the last of his fear. When he tried to walk he discovered his legs were stiff, and that when he set it down one foot tingled as if a thousand pins had been pressed into it, and he laughed.

For diversion the man told old stories, which the child heard vaguely, and when that grew stale, held the boy's forefinger in his own rugged palm and counted the stars.

'Fifty-one, fifty-two.'

And though once or twice lightning came there was no thunder, and because of the increasing stars it seemed to the boy that the storm had lost all terror for him, that perhaps he had been asleep when the most terrible flashes came, and that soon the village would come and from then onwards no fear.

'I'm not frightened, Grandfather,' he said a dozen times.

Then, as it struck nine o'clock and the boy listened to the notes roaming about the dark fields, he saw a star shoot.

FEAR

'A star fell down! A star fell down!' he immediately cried. 'Oh! it fell like——'

He was seized with joy, punched the man's legs, jumped into a pool and cried again:

'A star fell down!'

But his grandfather said nothing.

In the superstition that a falling star means death the man did not wholly believe, but for some reason he could not help recalling it suddenly. As he went down the hill his mind became restive, and he thought of his wife, of her death, then of his own age, his stale limbs and the possibility of his dying. And gradually he felt he was doomed to die soon and he began to sweat, as the boy had done, and was oppressed by the idea of something terrible and black waiting in readiness to crush the life from him, and that against it all he had no chance. He felt weak and depressed in body and soul.

One or two birds began to chirp and the boy heard them, but like the man he thought only of the star. He remembered he must ask why in the hut there was a smell of fish, if animals were afraid, and where birds hid during the storm, but looking up into his grandfather's face saw it serious with fearful shadows and gleams and he dared only say:

'Did you see the star fall?'

There was no reply. As they walked down the hill the man, becoming more and more stricken by the fear of death, could not hold himself still. But the boy would only laugh, and while watching for other stars to shoot, wonder with perplexity why his grandfather looked stern and miserable, hurried along as if it were going to rain again, and never spoke to him.

A COMIC ACTOR

Of all the farmers in our district William Twelvetree was the poorest and most unlucky. He was a good fellow, very conscientious and very diligent, but he worked without method and bargained without astuteness, and, most serious of all, he lived in dreams.

His modest farm was set in a lonely spot two miles from the village, seven from the town and fifteen from market. Owls roosted in his barn, and a pair of impudent magpies would often build in his orchard. Providence had never bestirred itself either to help his pigs to farrow or to keep blights from his trees or to ripen his harvests profitably. With these troubles and a wife and four children to keep, life was not easy for him. Furthermore, his children were all girls, who, since they had come late in marriage, were still young enough to be problems of feeding and clothes. His wife did her best for them, but she was old-fashioned and simple, and the best she could do was to make them curiously frilled and gusseted little frocks cut out of her own, so that the children, like her, looked for ever like frowsy bundles of discarded petticoats.

But William and his family were devoted. They were like a little community, naïve, honest, strangely refined and bound up in themselves. One thing only was startling about them and that was William's ambition. That ambition, however, Providence had ignored also. The four children and the mother alone were aware of its existence. To the children it was magic and wonder. To Isabel, the wife, it was the impulse to occasional prayer. For William, who was a bright, fat little man, it was something to be pursued tirelessly and infinitely, like the Holy Grail. It was William's ambition to act in a play.

Every Christmas, for many years, the family played *The Midsummer Night's Dream* in the big kitchen, and the

A COMIC ACTOR

children were the fairies. The little girls played well and sweetly. Isabel, who was very tall, was a splendid Titania, even if she did veil her hair in a butter-cloth. But only William could act his part; he alone remembered to employ his hands, to flourish his dirty overcoat as though it were a cloak and to make his voice sound poetic and touching. And when at the end the family applauded each other, again William was the important figure. He it was whom they cheered. And he it was who bowed low and deep with grave smiles that were purposely faintly weary too, as if he were indeed some real *jeune premier*, very bored and very successful.

But William's ambition went no farther. Once, before he had grown so fat, he had imagined himself as Hamlet or some young king, but now he would have been glad of a minor rôle, something as small as the part of the porter in *Macbeth* or of the peasant taking the basket of figs to Cleopatra. But not even these opportunities ever arose, and he arrived at the age of forty-five without having once appeared upon a stage.

Then, one autumn, the local journal printed an announcement. All those interested in drama and the birth of a dramatic society for the town of Wander were requested to attend a meeting there.

There followed days of unprecedented excitement at the farm, and then William drove to the meeting in a milk-float. Rain had been falling, churning the roads to swamps, and William walked into the hall looking like a tramp. But as he took off his overcoat he felt almost unbearably happy. Not even the unanimous decision of the society to act, not a play of Goldsmith or Shakespeare, but a musical drama called *The Prisoner of Love*, could change for him his almost childish delight. And nervously, tentatively, he offered himself for a part.

He was told in return that within a week he should apply

THIRTY TALES

for a part, while being warned that such a part was not, of course, bound to be allotted to him.

William read the play. Each act, each scene, each line, filled him with the conviction that he must apply for the part of a certain Duke. That, he felt, was his destiny. Gradually he began to rehearse the part, then to take it into the fields with him, then to dream of it at nights.

But at the first rehearsal it appeared that seven men besides William had pictured themselves as Dukes. This amused the company. William, nursing his libretto, tried to laugh also, but his mortification was too sickening and the memory of his secret, earnest rehearsals too painful. And not daring to reflect on what his fate might be, he stared and waited.

Eventually the play was cast. Then it was announced that he, who resembled perhaps more than anything a publican, had been chosen for a monk.

And arriving home, he smiled wanly, puffed out his cheeks, and looked doleful in that comic way which so delighted the children. Yet it almost hurt him to say to them: 'I'm a monk, and I visit a maiden in prison, then I make jokes to her. That's my part.'

'And a very good part, too, I'm sure,' said Isabel.

'Oh, it's awfully comic, if that's anything.'

'Well, then, be thankful, William dear. I'm sure you'll be as good a monk as a duke.'

'Perhaps,' he said; but he spoke ironically.

Many weeks passed. There was in the play a young girl of extraordinary talent who took the part of the imprisoned maiden. Her beauty was light and delicate, her eyes were translucent and expressed all the shades and tones of youth with unforgettable, ravishing loveliness. She herself was like a sea-shell. Her voice, very low and soft, made the other actors give up whispering and listen. William thought of that voice as being like a bee in a window-pane in summer.

A COMIC ACTOR

But her singing voice was of even rarer, lovelier quality; then it was an exquisite soprano which sounded like a dulcimer or the glass hangings of a chandelier jingled by a breeze. From the first rehearsal her acting was remarkable. By intuition she knew how to look, move, speak and carry herself. Half the actors fell at once in love with her. William himself felt that in the scenes with her he acted more certainly, inspired by her extraordinary cleverness and beauty.

It happened that, one evening, as he stood listening to her sing the song, 'Now doth my heart, imprisoned, burst its bonds for thee,' something seemed to melt in his breast. In a sort of exaltation, he never ceased gazing at her. Afterwards, he recalled all that had passed with eternal wonder at himself, and his sleep was broken for thinking of her.

When the time of the first performance approached, he felt he bore a curious, worshipping kind of love towards this girl. He remained quiet and secretive about it, watching only for the first sign of understanding or acknowledgment in her without ever speaking a word.

At last the playbills were out. The name of the girl was displayed in larger and heavier type than the rest. He would read her name—'Lucia'—in all the shops as he drove to market.

William implored Isabel not to attend the first performance of the play. 'Please don't be there. Come to the matinée instead. I shall be so terribly nervous,' he said.

And since he seemed nervous even at the dress rehearsal, Isabel agreed not to go.

He arrived early at the theatre. After sorting out his monk's costume, he sat down on a property-basket and thought, seriously, and for the first time, of speaking to the girl. As to what he wanted to say to her he was not at all clear. He would, he thought, express some kind of appreciation of her wonderful talent. He rehearsed a private and very earnest speech to her. He trembled even as he muttered

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aloud some rigmarole of stumbling flattery. He made a fool of himself even in the privacy of the dressing-room. But he did not care. If he had no illusions as to the loveliness and talent of the girl, he thought, he need have none about the wisdom of speaking.

Presently the rest of the actors arrived and began to dress. The thought of the girl never left him. He took up a pair of black flesh-tights and drew them on, and tied them about his fat belly.

Soon, completely garbed, he left the room. He must be made up; his wig must be found. Then, as he shuffled past the wings, he came upon two figures conversing in low tones. One was a woman; her perfume reached him with overpowering sweetness. Trying to discover who they were, he tripped over his long brown habit as he passed, and the low, bee-like voice of the young actress called out after him:

'I say, Brother Bono, don't be in a hurry. Let's look at you.'

In his confusion he felt foolish and a little mean, as if discovered in some disgraceful act. When the girl turned him about he wanted to protest, but he only gazed intently at the magnificent dress of green silk with edges of silvery, glistening sequins reaching to her ankles, and the pure white fan in her hands. Of that earnest and flattering speech he had composed in the dressing-room he could remember nothing. He did not smile in return in response to a compliment paid him by the Duke, her companion, and he was relieved when Lucia declared at last:

'Yes, you make a splendid monk. Now go along and let them make you up.'

So he shuffled away. 'If only they had made me the Duke,' he could not help thinking, and his mind grew wretched with wild conjecture.

Painted up and wearing a wig which made his head look like a yellow bladder with a fringe of horsehair, he made a

A COMIC ACTOR

more excellent monk than he himself had ever dreamed. When he wrapped his arms in his sleeves, and stared lugubriously at himself in the glass, he saw a squat, humbugging lay brother, and the sight hurt him. So he closed his eyes and tried to forget himself and the foolish way he had spied on the young girl.

He remained like this until the play began. Then, amid much noise of orchestra and singing, of actors and actresses whispering in the passages and rustling their strange costumes, he shuffled to the wings to watch the girl act. She acted magnificently, singing as sweetly as a May-thrush after rain. The house clamoured for her. When she bowed and smiled at the end of the act his whole frame softened in a sort of proud, lovable admiration of her.

During the interval he had an inspiration. He would take her a cup of coffee and, as she drank it, speak his thoughts upon her acting and her singing. He seized a cup, and ran hither and thither with it in his hands, spilling the coffee on his habit, his shoes, his hands, on chairs and property-baskets. But she had vanished, and he dare not ask for her. At last, when the remaining half of the coffee had grown cold, he put it under a chair and crept away.

It became rapidly more and more agonising to wait for the last act—that scene in which he visited the girl in prison, wept at that touching despair she conveyed so admirably in the song, ‘Now doth my heart, imprisoned, burst its bonds for thee,’ and then, drying his tears on his sleeve, made his light-hearted jokes about the outer world and gave her the keys to escape. He sat morose and introspective. Now, infrequently, he wished the play were over.

Then his cue came. Although he had stood in readiness for half an hour, he was taken by surprise. He tumbled on to the stage more like a clown than a monk, and was greeted by a burst of irrelevant laughter, which, dying down, made silence for the ecstasy of longing and beatitude which seized

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the girl as she began to sing. His mouth dropped open. Suddenly the unexpected strength of her utterance, and at the same time its dulcet tenderness, affected him so much that, in reality and without warning, he burst into tears. His self-control vanished. Through his tears the audience appeared a bluish bank of mist. The girl herself floated about him like some extraordinary pale green ghost.

He stumbled forward, drying his tears in readiness to give her the keys. The audience was much moved.

'Who are you?' shrieked the girl in tones of most admirable terror.

She shrank away; but presently she came so near that he breathed her perfumes, saw the shining ivory blackness of her painted brows and the shadowiness between her half-covered breasts. Suddenly these things seemed to reduce him to the depths of an imbecile hopelessness. He began to stammer. He had a frog in his throat. His tongue was like glass-paper. And then, worst of all, he forgot the lines he could once repeat so well. His mind became no more than an empty eggshell. He began, his eyes large and doleful, to stare this way and that and fumble with the cord of his habit. The irrelevant laughter which had first greeted him began to run in tiny ripples about the audience again. The girl herself was staring at him with indignant eyes. Whispers came from the prompter. Then, when everything seemed quite lost and hopeless, the unfortunate man invented some lines.

They, too, were hopeless.

The young actress was infuriated. He knew from the repeated glances of scorn she gave him and from her cruel, pinching embrace in return for the keys that he had offended her irrevocably.

He fled to the dressing-room. Hiding his fat face in his greasy hands, he called himself a fool, a hopeless, idiotic failure. Repelled by a strong aroma of cocoa-butter, he

A COMIC ACTOR

raised his face from his hands, and, looking up, he saw for a second time the crass humbugging face of the monk staring sheepishly back at him from the mirror, and he sickened in disgust for himself.

Presently, utterly humble, he began to have some notion of apologising to the girl. He went out to seek her.

It happened that she was just then returning from the stage. The play was over and the players, much relieved, were shouting and laughing to each other. The centre of everything was the young actress, who was surrounded with many triumphant baskets of cream, red, mauve and yellow blossoms and boxes knotted with ribbons. She was screaming with happiness. As he saw her his heart shrank like a pea in winter, and the hopeless folly of trying to speak with her overcame him. And he crept away.

Taking off his monk's garb which he now hated, he dressed himself, and, without seeing her again, drove home. Persistently and unmercifully he maligned and reproached himself. At the thought of the two remaining performances of the play he was nauseated and felt he could never face them. His acting was hopeless; he himself was hopeless.

There were lights at the farm. Isabel had waited up for him.

'William!' she cried, and she embraced him joyfully.

Suddenly the four girls, unable to sleep for excitement, tumbled downstairs and embraced him also. He gazed at them sorrowfully, without a word.

Thinking he must be acting, they all cried out: 'Oh! just like a monk. Oh! isn't it just like a monk?'

He merely kept on looking at them in the same way.

'And how was it?' they all suddenly wanted to know. 'Did it go off well? Did they applaud you? Was it good?'

'Yes, it was very good.'

'And you? Were you a success?' they clamoured.

'Yes,' he murmured.

THIRTY TALES

Only by lying could he defend and soothe himself. Something thick and warm fell about his heart if he lied.

Suddenly the four girls took hands with their mother and began to dance about him, their frowsy nightgowns flying out like crinolines.

'Good old Daddy! Bravo!' they shouted. 'Daddy's done it! We knew you would—we knew you would!'

All at once they ceased dancing and began to applaud him furiously. He did not know what to do. He felt the smart of tears on his face and could not look at the children.

Then, suddenly, not knowing how else to cover his confusion, he began to bow, gravely and with a trace of weariness, as he had often done at Christmas-time, smiling in a strained way as if indeed he had been some real *jeune premier*, very bored and very successful, at the height of his triumph.

THE IDIOT

IN the little blue-walled chapel the choir streamed in, and having bowed irregularly, faced the western window and blinked in the glare of the evening sun. Below a congregation had already gathered, and opposite, in the gallery, groups of little boys were huddled like noisy puppies. There someone would now and then hiss warningly:

'Sssh! Sssh!'

To this, however, the children paid no heed but only shuffled their feet, laughed and talked more loudly, and suddenly exchanged ecstatic whispers:

'Taddo's come! There's Taddo the idiot!'

One by one they turned to the newcomer, a tall youth of nineteen or twenty, and began to laugh at his vacant face staring from his green, threadbare overcoat, and when he sat down, having forgotten to take off his hat, called to him:

'Taddo! Taddo! Get up! It's the hymn! Stand up!'

To their shrieking amusement he obeyed, mutely gazing for a minute at the other seated figures, before feverish hands dragged him down and voices whispered into his dirty ears:

'You mustn't stand up, Taddo! Sit down, that's all.'

Grinning piteously he sat down, but when they laughed again did not understand and shrank into his overcoat. And as he listened to the hubbub of chatter about him it seemed that everyone, even the preacher and the familiar coloured figures in the windows, were laughing at him.

When the hymn began he remembered the warning and remained seated. Shadows fell over him, making him feel safe like a child that cowers between the legs of its father when a dog barks; and believing that everyone had forgotten him, he suddenly chuckled deeply.

Instantly the boys lowered their books, exchanged glances and tittered loudly. One or two older people grew stern

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with shock, but the hymn surged on at a great shout, only Taddo remaining silent. When the singing ended the boys became quiet too and only laughed with their eyes.

Through the prayer, the following hymn and the reading of the lesson, Taddo sat with his head drawn into his overcoat, as if cringing under a blow. Soon the ray of sunlight that had rested on his head disappeared, the air grew dim, and he became like a dark statue. About him the boys, tired of singing and listening, began to sketch fat men in their books and write couplets on the yellow seats. In the gallery was a never-ceasing riot of muttering and laughter.

At Taddo's side two boys would now and then whisper urgently:

'Make a noise like an owl, Taddo! Fire a gun! Wring a hen's neck!'

Sometimes to those requests he would merely stare as if the speakers were transparent, at others chuckle without obeying, but now and then he would hold an imaginary gun *to his shoulder, softly mimic an owl, and with a choking sound stretch the neck of an invisible hen.*

On all sides the boys would laugh like things exploding. Once there came a desperate hiss of warning and a voice appealing to him in an undercurrent of whispers:

'Be quiet, be quiet!'

And in a minute he paused, then, growing afraid, buried his head in the thick shadows that lay piled from his feet to his waist. There he tried to breathe furtively, but instead only snorted like a cow. Thinking this to be some new mimicry the boys broke out into fresh laughter, coughed chokingly and dug fingers into his back, so that he became dizzy and imagining himself to be falling headlong over the gallery, tried to shout out. But the result was like the neigh of a horse, startling enough for someone to warn him:

'Taddo! Taddo!'

He lowered his head.

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'Do you want to be turned out?' he was asked.

It was the voice of the teacher, and from its tone Taddo at last understood that by imitating the voices of owls, dying hens and animals he had committed some wrong. Sweating and trembling with fear, he folded his arms about his head.

In that attitude of dejection he remained during the next hymn.

By that time the sun had vanished, and from the sullen mouth of the west clouds were already surging, making everywhere sultry and dark. Watching Taddo the boys began to think he had fallen into a fit and were silent like a brood of chickens under a sack.

'What's the matter with Taddo?' their minds asked. 'Why does he look like that?'

But the youth suspected nothing and solemnly played with the beans, nutshells and crumbs he found in his pockets. All the time thoughts swam like sleepy fish into his brain.

The organ played again, but raising his head Taddo saw that no one rose at the sound. He pondered on this, then heard money chinking on all sides of him and saw white plates passing from hand to hand. Fascinated he watched their surfaces darken, but when a plate approached and touched him, became afraid and passed it on with a violent jerk.

Something fell into his lap.

Looking down he at first thought a silver hole had been cut in his trousers. Then he touched it: slowly the burning shape of a shilling became imprinted on his flesh.

The sermon began. He sat like an image, cold and unable to feel his heart beat, and conscious only of the fiery spot in his hand, burning like a brand mark.

And because he had made neither movement nor sound for so long the boys began whispering again:

'Taddo! Taddo!'

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He shut his eyes, breathed warily and did not answer.

'He's asleep!' they told each other.

He let in little trembling chinks of light through his lashes. The chapel seemed very dark, full of green shapes which made soft collisions with each other. These and the words of the preacher, which he imagined to be accusing him, made him long to be outside again.

In the chapel it grew darker and darker, people looked at each other, at the umbrella-stands and thick windows and muttered:

'There's thunder about.'

But while they preserved composure Taddo grew more afraid, and seeing in the dark air and the grey faces only malice and hostility, glanced about him like a girl faced with rape. To his terrified eyes everything had changed. He tried to cry out, but nothing happened. Then, glancing up at the choir, it seemed that the archway there was the cavernous mouth of some great beast, open in a fierce yawn which not only seemed to expand but advance as if to swallow him up. In the distance was born a profound growl, making him grip his fingers in fear, and in the roof a great roar, scattering echoes.

Every moment he expected to be exposed or annihilated, and at last, unable to bear his fears any longer, he leapt up and ran from the chapel, whimpering.

Outside there fell on him a grey rain, heavy as the thunder which hammered at the clouds until they opened like dark doors and let in the lightning. In the flashes the roofs and pools glared like brass. As his clothes became soaked it seemed that from one terror he had run directly into another and, seeing the woods lying far down the road like black tents, ran to them for sanctuary.

Over him the sky was dark as a bruise, and as he ran he began to feel old and dispirited, but on reaching the woods the trees seemed to cry out to him in pity and the rain was no

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longer cold and like a shower of iron. There, too, was a smell of ferns, of pine-needles and many leaves, and sometimes a strange pungent whiff as of old smoke.

He crouched at the foot of a pine, shrank to its reddish trunk and whispered continually:

'Don't let them come, don't let them come!'

Above him the branches purred deeply as if understanding, and he was comforted. But the storm grew worse. Rain and wind rushed constantly through the wood and shudders of thunder along the sky. Against Taddo's chest and arms the pine vibrated powerfully, making him babble instinctive prayers.

Then he remembered the shilling and at once it seemed to him that for the storm's long affliction nothing else could be responsible; and he suddenly buried it in the dark earth.

The rain washed it up again. He stared and cried out: 'I didn't steal it! I didn't steal it!'

He buried it again and when it was upheaved a second time *thought there must be magic in it and shouted:*

'I'll take it back!'

On the road to the village he blubbered in his desperation. His only comfort was from the thought that soon the shilling would pass into other hands and that the storm would die.

But there were no lights in the slender windows of the chapel, and for some minutes he hammered on its door like a child upon an empty box, disappointed and wondering.

Ten o'clock struck as he knocked at the house of the minister. When the door was opened there came to him a warm, protective smell like that of dry linen, which made him forget the rainy darkness, the wood and his fears. When the minister spoke he merely answered:

'It's the shilling.'

The man looked at his outstretched palm with a startled air.

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'It's the shilling,' repeated Taddo.

But the other was silent.

'Take it! Take it!' whimpered the youth, his face half in the light. 'The shilling—take it!'

'Go home, my boy,' he was advised. 'Go home.'

His frenzied whispers poured out as if through a sudden leak: 'Take it! Only take it! It's the shilling! The shilling!'

The minister obeyed at last. For a moment nothing happened. Then suddenly it seemed that out there in the darkness was a mirror reflecting some strange light which even the shadow of the closing door could not darken.

In the warmth of the house the minister pondered, and thinking of the boy's drenched figure shuddered decently and said: 'God have mercy, God have mercy,' and went to bed. There he forgot the shilling.

But for Taddo everything was different, and as he walked away it seemed to him that the calming earth, the sweet air, the fresh-smelling trees and the stars appearing in the broken sky like inquisitive children, were all whispering to him: 'The storm is over, the storm is over.'

And he began to sing.

THE BIRTHDAY

For three years Nicoll had been at the university. On coming home in the autumn of his last year he was invited and went to a birthday-party of his sister's friend, where he found himself not only at a loss to explain why he had been invited but why the birthday should be kept at all. And as he looked down the table, which had been crowned by a cake bearing sixteen candles, he felt suddenly a faint, superior disgust for all creatures who kept birthdays, for the twenty people assembled there and for the oblong sea of sickly coloured food stretching before him. And he thought only of how soon it would be possible to get away.

To make it worse, before the eating began there arose some difficulty about lighting the candles, there was a hubbub, and an unknown girl in a red dress got up and, after shouting his name, tossed back her jet black hair and smiled at him. A little girl began to cry, an old man narrowly escaped burning his beard in the broken ring of flames and kept saying:

'Irene, my dear, this is nothing to what it will be when you're twenty-one!'

But Irene was not in the room, and this saying became a joke to all but the man himself. A little old woman at Nicoll's side, nearly submerged in shadows, kept chuckling to herself and declaring: 'She's like her mother,' and not caring that no one agreed with her. Everyone laughed and talked together. A little round-faced boy, with wonder-stricken eyes, blew out the matches when the candles had been lit, and then when the meal began, cried out, injured: 'I can't see to eat my jelly, I can't see to eat anything!'

But no one heeded him, the noise increased, and someone cried in astonishment:

'She's really sixteen!'

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And another: 'It doesn't seem long since she was born! Sixteen!'

'I can't see to eat anything!' complained the little boy.

'My dear,' said the old man, 'this is nothing to what it will be when you're twenty-one!'

And because Irene was still not in the room, everyone laughed again. The table shook, the little boy banged his fists on his knees. Then suddenly, without warning, a candle fell from the cake, burnt a hole in the white cloth, and spluttered out.

A silence followed. Nicoll heard the old woman breathing as if her throat needed oiling, and wondered why the quietness was so sombre and significant. And then, at that moment, the red-frocked girl cried out in dismay: 'Oh, I say! That's bad luck! That's bad luck!'

The commotion, as if under the urge of this omen, became terrific, and to Nicoll the room seemed hot, his head stifled and the spoon in his hand like a burning wire. Everyone talked of the fallen candle, of Irene and what she would think. Someone shouted her name, but she did not come, and the old woman in the shadows muttered some excuse for her. Nicoll stared at a red pool of fruit on his plate, sick and depressed by the idea of night going on indefinitely. Again and again he wished it were all over, all the superstitious talk, the hot room and the candle-light which made the heads of the old men look like yellow cheeses. And at last it seemed he could bear it no longer.

Then Irene came in and, only half-noticed, lit two lamps at the other end of the room.

Nicoll sat watching her. As she blew out the taper and stood regarding her guests, the smoke swam up leisurely before her face and was reflected in her eyes. At that moment he could only think:

'How tall she is!'

Then, as if step by step, he began ascending to other

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thoughts and impressions about her, and though not thinking consciously of her beauty, it seemed to him that in the hot noisy room her throat and arms gave out a coolness that transformed her into something singular and lovely. Under the lamplight her skin shone deep cream in colour. In her stillness she looked not only impressive but transient, too. And because of this Nicoll found that his boredom and the insufferable shallow chatter on all sides seemed to pass into forgetfulness. The unbearable atmosphere cast by the candles and the stagnant air of the room vanished as if blown away by a fresh wind, and he was filled with a desire to whisper to her and ask her to answer him.

He fell into a long, dreamy contemplation about her, at nothing, watched with joy every flicker that went across her face and was annoyed only when he heard the girl in red mouth in her ear: 'A candle fell off the cake, Irene. It's bad luck.'

He noticed she said nothing in return, but began carrying away the empty fruit-bowls with a serious, preoccupied air. She passed near him but did not smile, and with every movement seemed to grow sadder and graver, as if in mourning for the irrecoverable year which the party celebrated.

Soon she vanished, the candles were one by one blown out by the ecstatic breath of the little boy. Pipes were lit, the old man coughed and hummed tunes, everyone sighed. But Nicoll was conscious of nothing except that every few moments something beautiful passed and repassed him, making him glowing and sensitive.

'You'd never dream she was sixteen,' whispered the old woman. 'She's like her mother, too.'

'Yes. And how tall she is,' was all he answered.

But the old woman said nothing in return, and he sat in silence, watching the door where he expected Irene to come in.

He was invited to join some sort of game but refused,

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folded his hands over his knees and sat with an air of resignation. Then the door opened and a draught blew in various sounds. Among them he heard a voice calling 'Irene, Irene!' a sound of pattering feet, and some crockery set down.

The door was shut and for a long time never opened again. At his side the old woman grumbled in whispers about the chilly nights, the little boy talked to himself, and at Nicoll the girl in red would now and then smile. There was a song, he applauded unconsciously, and noticed the men were playing whist in one corner. The door was opened. Irene's mother came in. He was disappointed.

He began to wonder where the secret of her beauty lay. Then someone came in and said it was raining, and immediately he thought of the September dusk, the trees moving gently as if shrugging their dark shoulders against the falling dampness, and the ground drenched and hidden by leaves giving out fragrance. And just as it was impossible to say where the secret of that beauty lay he once more sat in contemplation about her.

Soon afterwards he suddenly went out. In the dark passage he heard her voice and, seeing light coming from under a door in a sharp streak, went in without waiting to discover who was there. He asked:

'Will you give me a drink of water?'

Irene smiled and disappeared. As if in a dream he heard the glass filling fiercely and in the room behind voices mixed with the moan of a violin someone had just struck up. Irene seemed gone for a long time. When he saw her return it was with a sensation of fear, as if he expected her to dash the water into his face and wake him. Sagging drops still hung on the lip of the glass as she held it just under his face.

For a minute nothing happened and, as though listening to the violin, they each stood there with an air of anticipation. Then Nicoll took the glass and without drinking said to her:

'It's been very long since I saw you.'

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Because his remark seemed foolish and mundane he gulped some of the water quickly, then stared at her, saw her murmur 'Yes,' and return his stare. He could say nothing.

'It's been five years,' she said at last.

He found her voice quiet and that it went with the rest of her being as harmoniously as the colour of a flower with its plant and made her beauty singular and touching.

'And you're sixteen, to-day!' he exclaimed. 'I can't imagine it. It's not possible.'

'That's Grandfather playing the violin,' she said. 'When you think of it, that seems just as silly, but it's true.'

He laughed, held up the glass, saw pinkish, shadowy shapes swimming behind and in it and drank.

'I ought to have wished you many happy returns long ago,' he said.

She smiled as if in a flood of bewilderment, which he could not understand, and suddenly asked:

'Is it true a candle fell off the cake? Is it? I wasn't there. Is it true?'

'Yes. It's quite right,' he replied. 'It burnt a hole in the tablecloth, that's all.'

'It's bad luck!'

'Oh! that's so silly. It doesn't mean anything. You mustn't take notice.'

'No, no,' she persisted. 'It means something is going to happen to me. Perhaps I'm going——'

'Oh! it's all nonsense,' he said. 'It means nothing. It's all nonsense, really.'

'No. It means something,' she repeated. 'Why should it fall off, unless!'

He made no answer and all the time he was silent imagined she looked on him as a boy. He wanted to tell her this but dare not. In the room behind the violin ceased, a dreary silence fell, and in the silence a moth brushed noisily against the lamp. Another lay with wings pressed like death on the

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window. Nicoll heard it raining outside, the leaves whispering and somewhere a tap dripping.

'I ought to go back,' she said.

'Not yet!'

She went to the lamp. By its light he saw her fingers tremble and asked:

'What's the matter, Irene?'

'Nothing!' she said; and then, 'You've forgotten a candle fell off the cake. That means something.'

With three angry puffs she put the room in darkness. He groped about saying, 'Where are you? Irene! Where are you?' Then he heard the swish of her dress and a laugh. The next moment he ran his hands against the wall and then on to her breast. It so happened she was pinioned by his arms and looked up at him reproachfully. In contrast with the hardness of the wall behind, her neck seemed unearthly and soft. And without a word of warning he kissed her twice.

Nothing was said. The birthday party went on noisily behind them, Nicoll heard the rain, the tap dripping and a moth booming somewhere fiercely. He thought of the candle which had fallen from the cake, wondered if it betokened anything, and then felt her suddenly squeeze his hand, saw her run away and disappear through a flash of light at the other door.

Soon afterwards he followed her, the violin began again, whist by the men went on in the corner, he was ogled by the girl in red and saw that nothing in the room had changed.

He sought out Irene and watched her. But little by little her spiritual and fresh beauty seemed to undergo a change and no longer impress him. Suddenly, the talk, the laughter, the rain, the violin and the lights were changed too. The idea of beauty was itself transient. The thought of this, and that Irene would never be sixteen again and appear to him as

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she had appeared in the dark kitchen, made him tired and sad, too.

And whether because of this or not, he had a desire not to look at her again, but to go home, not speak and only by silence impress everything upon himself.

He did so, and after thinking of her for two hours, fell asleep and dreamed of moths, an old woman, running water and a violin.

But for Irene it was different. She slept little, and when not sleeping thought as to why he had gone without a word, of the future, his looks, the dark kitchen, his two kisses, and the candle which had fallen off the cake.

THE BARBER

JONAH's saloon was not very big. It resembled more than anything a dirty blue bathroom fitted with a mirror large enough for ten fat men to preen themselves, and with seats looking for all the world like stolen church pews, none of them decently wide enough for the skinniest customer.

But we thought it very big—very big, very smoky, and very gloomy. In those days we were hardly tall enough to reach the stiff brass latch of the door, and we used to wriggle and squirm at the thought of a haircut there. Nevertheless we had to go.

For some reason there was always an army of men in Jonah's when we arrived: black-necked, poaching, shoe-making, prizefighting, often stinking men; men like brigands, men as bald as pigs, men with waistcoatfuls of silver medals, men with violet dragons and unicorns tattooed on their arms, even men like skeletons. Each man stood between us and the barber. There would be no haircut for us until the last man had gone.

We used to sit down, very still, like unaccustomed guests. Jonah presided, and of course we watched Jonah. He was an enormous man. In his hands a pair of grass shears would have looked like button scissors. His moustache was villainous, a symmetrical black sweep of pride, as sharp at the ends as a thorn on a sloe. When he held the razor above his head, it gleamed like a scimitar in the hands of an Arab, and its downward swoop was diabolical in its fierce accuracy.

'Zip-scrape! Zip-scrape!' went that razor. 'Zip-scrape!'

We were so awed we could hardly ask each other:

'How many men can you count this morning?'

'Seven.'

'Golly, seven!'

It seemed like an invincible horde. We would whisper dolefully.

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Then suddenly, terrifyingly, Jonah would bawl like a sea lion:

'No whispering!'

He would glare sternly down on us. It was difficult to understand if it were all part of some joke. But he was grave as a picture, and I suppose we never saw his winks at the men.

'What do you want?' he would demand next in his awful bass.

'Haircuts,' we would whisper timidly.

'Haircuts! Ha, ha! What next? Haircuts! Ha, ha!' White flicks of lather would fly from his great fingers. 'Ha, ha! Who told you to say that? Eh? What's your name? John Willy?'

'Tom.'

'Wha-a-at? Speak up! Did you say John Willy?'

'Tom.'

'Burn my buttons, whoever heard of that? What's your father?'

'A butcher.'

'A butcher, is he? Ha, ha!' He would glower. 'Tell him to send me a pound of sheep's lights and liver!'

Lights and liver! We cackled like two young drakes.

'No laughing!' he ordered. 'You wouldn't do to eat sausage with the queen, you two!'

His tone was terrible so that we crouched a little lower into the benches that were like pews, except that they were littered with comic newspapers, not knowing what to make of the old fool. 'Zip-scrape! chip-chip!' he went on. One by one the poaching, tattooed, shoemaking, stinking men would shuffle out, Jonah richer by twopence and threepence a time, until only one remained. We would begin pushing the pink and green papers under our bare thighs in readiness.

Then, suddenly, a tremendous roar in the empty room: 'Up you come for the guillotine!'

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What should we do then, like young leverets, but jump up together!

'One at once, balmy!'

What fools we were! Like a pair of Siamese twins we used to sit down together.

'Now then!'

We scuffled. Evidently I was born to be a creature of misfortune, for a dozen times out of thirteen I used to knock down Jonah's umbrellas. God knows why, but Jonah used to repair umbrellas—and there they would lie like a heap of great dead bats—black umbrellas, green umbrellas, blue umbrellas, snuff umbrellas, cart umbrellas, silk umbrellas, ladies' umbrellas as genteel as parasols and with heads like birds. And Jonah might have been the mother of them all, his pretended fury was so like a storm.

'Look at what you've done, you sprats! Nice thing! Who's going to pay for it? I'll cut your tails off!'

And he would seize one of his precious umbrellas and, brandishing it high and wide, belabour our backsides without mercy. Our running and fainting never saved us—we were cornered and pinched and cuffed unmercifully by that great black barber. It was painful; even the laughter pained.

'What do you come here for?' he would keep demanding.

'Haircuts.'

'Haircuts! I don't cut hair—I only cut tails off, you plagues!'

That provoked another ripple of titters. Only his being out of breath saved us.

'How many winter beans make five?' he would question gravely, with recovering breath.

We knew that joke.

'Four!' we bawled.

'Wait till I get hold of your shirt-tail!'

The chase would begin. The whirr of the blue flames under the geyser would be smothered by inarticulate cries,

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a chatter of trembling cigar-boxes, and by that stentorian voice bellowing at us.

Then suddenly—quiet, a frown, and the grave command: 'Tidy the boxes. Quick! Quick!'

We were obedient. In a moment all was orderly, and we could once again hear the gas singing.

'Kneel in the chair!'

Only one would go. Swiftly a white sheet was tucked in at his collar and fell about him like a surplice. There would be a brief snip-snip of Jonah exercising his scissors, and then he stood in readiness.

Phouff! Whoever was in that chair would abruptly choke, struggle and cry. There was no end to Jonah, no end to the caprices of his imperial black will, and the sight of a boy's chin bearded with snowy lather apparently made life richer for him.

He would teach us to go there for haircuts!

All this, the umbrellas, the absurd catechisms, the comedy of the boxes and the lather smacked into one's face had happened before. We were never certain whether we liked it or not. We were already shaggy as ponies about the ears, and had received orders not to return like hooligans. Doubtless we could have visited some more discreet, black-coated model of a barber, but we always chose Jonah.

Presently the bell would jangle again and a man would enter, a commercial traveller or a florist, perhaps, so that the Jonah we knew would dissolve utterly, and a Jonah we felt was not a familiar, a Jonah as polite and neutral as a commissionaire, took his place, with the brush that had once wildly soaped our mouths now as prudent as the smelling-bottle of a lady.

'Zip-scrapel! Chip-chip!' went that razor again. 'Zip-scrapel!'

Gradually the pews began to fill again with more horsey, stinking, black-faced men, who smoked clays, chewed vile

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wads and swore about 'the silly sod who had let them down in the Cambridgeshire.' Jonah once again ignored us. The span of innumerable trims and shaves, shaves and trims would drearily lengthen. Patiently we would watch different faces coming and going. The sheep's-head clock on the wall would show that we had waited two hours. Hunger, sore backsides, aching knees, and eyes smarting from tobacco smoke would fill us with a wearisome, maddening desire to be gone.

At last, when there were perhaps ten men waiting to be shaved or trimmed, a look would pass between us, and as softly as we could we would rise and creep away.

Then, artful and mischievous as mice, we would push each other against the door until that bell of his wrangled wildly, tauntingly, avengingly, happily, until Jonah ran out, a cart-umbrella in one hand and a razor in the other, and until we were sick with laughter at the sight and sound. If only he could have caught us! But he never advanced.

He vanished at last as if he had never seen us, and we returned home shaking those shaggy, ruffled rat's-tailed heads he had never even touched with his scissors.

THE FUEL-GATHERERS

THE afternoon sunshine fell softly on the backs of the women advancing along the hillside in a ragged line. On the stone spire and the brown roofs obtruding from the plain below, on the burnt hillside, the empty cornfields and the red, golden and dark leaves of the woods it lay also with the quiet magic benediction of autumn.

Everywhere hung a great stillness as if a blessing were being bestowed upon those things: only the women, as if oblivious, moved beneath it, unevenly, stooping, rising and going on.

Each of the women had a sack with her. Sometimes a faint breeze played among their skirts and sent a ripple through the crooked line. Haunting the edge of the woodside, thrusting themselves into the hedges, straddling the ditches, loosening stumps of rooted wood with their feet, all the time the sound of their voices filled the clear, hushed air of the afternoon like the chatter of strange birds.

Of these women two were fat, very short of breath; thick, heavy skirts hid their feet and woollen shawls most of their heads; but like the rest their hands moved quickly, their sacks were already more than half-full. Among the others was a little, pale-faced woman wearing a man's cap, the sleeves of her blouse rolled up beyond her sharp red elbows, and above all these, in a sort of ever-vigilant, avaricious and mean dominion over them, a woman of nearly six feet strode swiftly, straddled the ditches with ease and made the deepest holes in the woodside. Her instinct seemed to take her always a little ahead of the rest, her long legs impatient of her skirts, the strings of her blouse bursting out under the immense, sudden bends of her body.

She had once advanced far from the rest. In her swift, impatient manner she set down her sack, clutched it between her knees and pinned her fallen hair in a makeshift coil at

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the back of her neck. Then, taking the last pin from her mouth, she shouted back to the others:

'Ain't you ever coming? Good God, dark'll be atop of us soon!'

There was returned a hasty babble of voices and at last the clear protest:

'We're coming as fast as we can! We have to wait for Rebecca all the time, though. She can't get along.'

The tall woman darted swift eyes beyond her three friends and then to the two other figures advancing slowly, laboriously, almost imperceptibly behind, shouted in a tremendous voice:

'Come on, for God's sake—come on, come on!'

But the pace of these others, as if frustrated by something more powerful than this voice, did not increase. One of them indeed actually paused, lifted up her face and then turned her head to the others. She seemed to speak, listen for a reply that never came and then lifted her face again.

'It's Rebecca!' she called back. 'We'll catch up soon!'

The tall woman gave up this reply with a motion and a word or two of impatience and disgust, tossing her dark head. To the rest she called suddenly, once more, with increased contemptuousness, and then picking up her sack strode on without another look at them.

The two belated stragglers came on behind as slowly as ever. Sometimes the first would pause, pick up a stick or two and cast a glance back at the other. Her very girlish face had no impatience, no anger, no meanness on it, but looking at the other figure she would sometimes sigh strangely, as if to express something between tolerance and weariness of its decrepitude, its shuffling feet, its worn, trembling hands and shoulders. Looking patiently at this face, draped like a faded yellow image in its black shawl, she would call quietly 'Rebecca, Rebecca,' until, receiving nothing but silence in answer, she would turn and go slowly on again, following the rest.

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As if having heard nothing, as if unaware of the existence of the other women, this old figure, bent always very low, followed the girl with tiny steps. The sack she carried had only the faintest bulge at its very foot. Her hands grasped it feebly yet desperately, like some cherished possession. She now and then set it with scrupulous care on the grass and with her hands explored the grass beneath the trees, fumbling beneath the crisp leaves that had already half covered it, and again carefully, almost secretly putting whatever she found into her sack. Her hands were very quick in closing it again. Going on once more, muttering yet unperturbed, she would muse abstractedly on what she had seen there: on the beech-nuts, leaves, wood-nuts, the sheep's wool, the few dry twigs and the single magpie's feather lying there, like an arrow of black and white. This brief, sometimes confused, memory would make her cease muttering, smile and glance into the sky. The sun, falling into her eyes, would cause them to shine like very old jewels of some blue colour. It gave her expression of such dreaminess, softness and content that she seemed to belong momentarily to another existence, cut off from the women far ahead and even from the girl loitering somewhere between.

These strange actions, pauses and her day-dreams made her journey along the woodside a long one. Reaching the end of the wood at last she found the women grouped there in conference, the girl already with them.

The voice of the tall woman reached her first.

'What we get outside the wood ain't nothing to what we'll get in,' she observed. 'There's wood there ain't been touched for ten years. Nobody'll see us. Are you coming? It'll be all right—in the middle, in the dark part,' she urged.

The little woman for her answer threw her sack into the ditch and drew another empty one from a great pocket in her skirt.

'Ain't you coming too?' The tall woman addressed this

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question to the others. One of the fat women began apologetically in reply:

'I'd be about done at the end. I can't get my breath.'

'We can sit down—take our time—needn't go all over,' contemptuously urged the tall one. 'You can't go back with only one stinking sackful!'

'I can't carry two—not how I am,' declared the other. 'I can't!'

'Pahl can't you send Amos for it to-night?'

The scorn in her voice seemed to give her impetus enough to stride the ditch, mount the fence on the other side and scramble into the wood before the other opened her mouth again. 'I ain't coming,' she tried to begin. But suddenly, never finishing this half-hearted sort of protest, she set down her sack and crawled laboriously over the fence into the wood. The tall woman pulled her over with impatient hands, while the other fat woman waddled across the ditch and stood ready to be helped too. Presently only the girl and the old woman remained outside the wood.

The eyes of the four women eyed those two for some time in silence, at first expectantly, then suspiciously, and at last with a trace of contempt. Suddenly the big woman leaned over the fence and mouthed:

'What are you standing there for? Ain't you coming?'

The old woman, engaged in fumbling among the leaves at her feet, did not hear this sharp demand and did not lift her head. But the girl, very immobile, her eyes wide open, a faint flush on her cheeks, replied instead, in a low voice:

'It's Rebecca. We'd never get along in there with her.'

Her eyes lowered themselves to the unconscious head bent near her feet, then suddenly jerked themselves upward at the sound of the tall woman's voice.

'Take no notice of her!' she was urged. 'She won't know

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you've gone. Your mother'll want firing bad enough. Don't your roof leak now, like it used to? Come on!

'I'll stay with Rebecca,' said the girl.

The tall figure laughed with faint derision. 'You're frightened of being caught, perhaps? Your fine Johnny might hear about it, or perhaps you're too proud to come in the wood and gather sticks with the like of us—and your roof leaking. Come on!'

An expression of confusion, of injury, of piteousness covered the girl's face at these words. 'It's not that,' she tried to stammer, 'only I don't want to leave Rebecca. And I've got enough. My sack's nearly full. I can just go on steady with Rebecca.'

'Oh! it's your fine Johnny, that's all,' taunted the big woman. 'It ain't the wood you're afraid of. Oh! I saw you come out of the wood last night, didn't I? You weren't frightened then, because your fine Johnny had his arm round your neck and was looking at you—ain't that right?' She paused, picked up her sack and turning threw over her shoulder the swift parting taunt: 'You weren't picking sticks in there with your fine one, were you?'

She ended all this abruptly on a harsh laugh with which the rest joined in, less loud but with the same air of insensitive derision, before turning and leading them through the fading undergrowth into the gloomy heart of the wood. For a long time after they had disappeared, and could be heard only by faint sounds and remote echoes soon lost in the tangled arches of the great trees, the girl stood looking after them, a pained flush dying unwillingly on her cheeks, her eyes misty and trembling, her long dark lashes shining and heavy with unfallen tears. Her lips sometimes moved faintly, as if to utter some reproach or protest, but no sound ever came. Suddenly, as if finding this task of watching and reflecting too much for her, she turned away, let her sack slip from her hands and sat on the grass by Rebecca in the sunshine.

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For a long time it seemed that the clear warmth of the autumn air was the only kind and compassionate thing on the hillside. Rebecca did not move except to grope among the leaves and put odd, useless things into her sack, and never looked at the girl. But what the other women had said seemed to fill the silence over and over again, bitterly depressing her. Their hardness of heart for the things very dear to her, their reproaches, the tall woman's coarse wit and laughter, the moanings of the stout ones, the thin snarl of the little woman, and in all of them the same avariciousness and meanness in some degree, cowed the girl briefly with unhappiness and misery.

Suddenly, when it seemed to her that her tears must fall instead of drying up in the sunshine, she felt Rebecca put out her hand and touch her. The trembling gaze of the old woman met the eyes of the girl with a kind of dim but very warm assurance and compassion.

'What are you crying for, eh?' she murmured.

The girl only blinked her eyes in the sunshine. This movement did not seem to escape the soft gaze of the woman and in another moment she made another murmur.

'You are crying, aren't you?' she said.

This time the young girl, as if instinctively, nodded quickly, parted her lips and tried to smile into Rebecca's face. This smile fading suddenly she tried to whisper something, but her voice only choked and lost itself. As if knowing what to expect, as if understanding everything to the utmost, the old woman sat silent, watching the girl's few tears fall and make little silver lines in the red of her cheeks, listening to her faint sobs, and holding in her own unsteady fingers the warm, young hands. At last the sobbing and the tears ended: then Rebecca spoke again.

'How old are you, eh?' she asked.

'Fifteen,' whispered the girl. 'Last spring.'

'You're Rachel Blackwell's little 'un, ain't you?'

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'Yes.' The girl nodded too.

The woman sat silent for a moment, as if lost again. 'Yes, yes,' she began to murmur presently again. 'I know them all—Rachel, Mary, Till, Lizzie, Jabez—I know all your family—all of them. Don't you cry any more,' she urged suddenly. 'Sit along o' me. Did they laugh at you? It seemed as if I heard them laughing.'

The girl, staring into the sunshine, gulped before speaking. 'Yes. They wanted us to go in there. I didn't want to go—I don't like them, none of them, so they laughed at me. They laughed at me about—about——'

Her voice trailed off, never finishing its last sentence, until her lips trembled and cleared again, and again the old woman, as if understanding everything, as if with perfect insight, knowledge and compassion, kept silent, shaking her head slowly, caressing the girl's hand, gazing with her shining eyes. She had been conscious of much that had happened in the woodside, of some things the women had said, of their greed, their coarse laughter, and like the girl she had mused on this, stoically, quietly, saying nothing, only gathering together her odd nuts, leaves and grasses, late flowers and fallen feathers in silence except for the rustle of her feet in the grass. The faint emotions she did not speak made themselves felt in tiny tremors across her breast and visible in the pale lustre of her eyes. She knew that she, like the girl, hated and longed to be away from the other women, but to none of their eyes was this hatred or desire visible. To the girl especially it seemed that during her long silences she sat on the grass dreaming of nothing, lost and enchanted simply by the sight of the empty sky. But when she spoke the girl liked the comforting sound of her voice and the trembling, almost as if shy, glances of her nearly transparent eyes.

These things set her at rest while listening to Rebecca murmuring on and on, sometimes in a curious disjointed

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way, sometimes soft and musing, now and then clear and with words which made the girl smile again.

'Don't you go in the wood if you don't want,' she said once. 'Don't go after them. They'll come back. In a little while you can go back to your mother, only wait a little bit more, along o' me. I shall be going down soon.'

With these words in her ears the girl seemed to become content to watch the plain below, with its dry, empty corn-fields, its houses and trees, with the spire of the church to which she went every Sunday rising brown and gleaming in the sunshine. The old woman fell silent too. Gradually the sun slipped across the plain, slanting long shadows across the green hillside.

'Rebecca,' said the young girl suddenly, 'they don't seem to come back.'

'They'll come soon.'

'Perhaps they won't come.'

Rebecca, without shifting her gaze, said, 'I shall be going down soon. I shan't be long.'

'Mother sent me with them. But I don't care,' said the girl. 'I'll come with you.'

She waited at the side of the old woman for a long time after saying this, watching the plain with far-off eyes, eating a few beech-nuts and with a faint pain still in her breast, thinking, constantly thinking. Sometimes, as if overcome, she shut her eyes, seeing in the darkness the face of a boy, and relinquishing this only after a long time, a struggle, a sigh. The other women did not return, and under this new influence she ceased to suffer the pain their words had caused her. The face of the boy began to appear in the sunlight, the trees over the plain. Suddenly she jumped to her feet, staring at the village beneath and cried:

'It's getting late. I must go home. Let me help you get up.'

The old woman, motioning with her pale hands, shook her head. 'It's early,' she said, 'you needn't go.'

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But the girl, naïvely eager, watching the village from the corners of her bright eyes, repeated:

'I must go. We've sat here a long time.' She saw that Rebecca did not move. 'Baint you coming?' she asked quickly, as if with a sudden, fresh kind of hope.

Almost as if detecting this new note in her voice the woman shook her head and said, 'You go, you go. I can come down soon. Your legs are younger than mine. You go.'

The girl seemed to hesitate, opened her mouth and stood watching her. The woman only repeated:

'Go, go, my dear. I'll stay a little longer in the sun.'

Murmuring some words indistinctly the girl glanced over the hillside, then down at the village again and at the dipping autumn sun. 'I'll go then,' she said suddenly in a louder voice. She picked up her sack. 'I'll go—I must go.'

Watching her depart over the hillside, her form bent under the weight of the sack and casting its long shadow over the green, the old woman's lips drew themselves slowly into a kind of lifeless immobility. Presently she saw the figures of the other women emerge from far down the woodside and straggle downwards towards the village, resting often with their great bundles, chattering loudly and laughing. The girl had disappeared, and suddenly gazing at these other figures the old woman seemed to miss the lightness of her step, her shining eyes, even her tears and the sound of her broken voice. Her head full of a strange numbness, she saw the women take up their sacks and straggle off again, an ungainly line of white and black in the sunshine. The sight of this made her touch her own sack, lying flat on the grass at her side, and after gazing at it briefly, open it and peer at its strange army of contents within. Once again her eyes took on the far-off dreaminess the girl had wondered about. She took out the magpie's feather, played with it slowly, a smile on her face. This dreaminess, this sort of strange make-believe, went on a long time, deepening, possessing

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the woman wholly, transforming her. It seemed that nothing, not a call, promise, a sign could move her. Only once she glanced up and saw the last of the women vanishing over the brow of the hill. A faint shadow, so swift as to be either of regret or relief, passed over her face at this. Then again her face settled into immobility, into a peaceful serenity of watchfulness and dreams. Her feathers and flowers and grasses lay forgotten in her lap, her hands spread there also, in an attitude of protection and piety.

The sun was sinking with autumnal suddenness towards a horizon of blue mist. Still clear and sunlit the sky seemed to try to hold up its yellow orb for the woman to watch with her eager, suddenly greedy eyes. This expression, reminiscent sometimes of those of the women, of the girl with her sudden desire to be gone, gave her eyes a strong, piercing light. Suddenly as if by some mysterious process recognising this the woman let her eyes travel over the whole sky, thinking of the women, and lastly and more lingeringly of the girl. The memory of her voice, her young eyes, her pain and her own dreaminess, filled her with delight, then sadness.

Her eyes filled, like the girl's, with sudden, lingering tears, dimming her vision of the landscape below. Regret and sadness plainly in her face now; in her weakness and loneliness unable to prevent her tears falling on to the contents of her sack, she gazed across the plain for a long time. She nursed herself in her great loneliness. Then suddenly it seemed to her dim vision that there were no longer trees, cornfields, hills and cottages lying there below, but in a moment of mysterious transformation the plain seemed to her as a great bay, utterly serene and still, the dark fields as the shadows of clouds on the water, the spire as the brown sail of some returning ship just at rest, lying there with a kind of serene majesty, never stirring, and the sound of the women retreating down the hillside as no more than the voices of children playing on the shore.

THE SPRING SONG

ALL day the June sky had stretched out in perfect serenity like an immense blue pond without a ripple or shadow. Beneath the earth seemed to tremble like a thirsty animal chained just beyond reach of water, while the trees sat in a sort of solemn imposing lethargy, like judges presiding over some interminable suit between earth and heaven. I took off my coat as I descended the hill. The sweat ran down my nose in a warm trickle. Thick, snowy dust rose up and clouded the brightness of my shoes, just as a faint ominous haze had begun to cloud the horizon beyond the reposeful roofs of the town below. One or two people eyed me curiously as they shot past in their traps to market. Sometimes when they had gone I grinned after them with the faintly cynical assurance of a young man having made an impression, and was happy.

As I came to the streets of the town, however, I struggled into my coat again. I had the sensitive pride of a young man, too, and already besides, the dark haze on the horizon seemed to have shot forward as if under some mysterious urge from beyond the edge of the earth. I didn't like the look of it, and I began to do my trivial pieces of shopping with an alacrity which brought the sweat running down my nose faster than ever.

Finally, at a bookseller's in the market-place, I paused abruptly in the act of turning over a page. The proprietor put his face outside the door as if suspicious of something not quite right in the sky. Instinctively I followed his glance. I uttered a cry of stupid amazement which he silenced abruptly with the laconic pronouncement: 'Thunder.' We nodded sagaciously at each other like men resolving to share a secret. The next moment he left the shop and began to gather in his trays of books with the air of a conscientious shepherd.

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I, too, hastened outside. The grey awnings of the market-stalls were already flapping ominously in the breeze that had sprung up. The sky was three-quarters dark under an oppressive advance of iron-coloured cloud. Beneath the awnings little pools of fruit and confectionery, flowers and cloth, began to gleam in that sinister light as if afire.

From the doorway of the book-shop, to which I had hastily retreated again, I watched the market soak rapidly under an incredibly fierce onslaught of thunderous rain. The grey polish of the cobbles gave up the gloom of the sky again. One or two people flitted like dark spirits across the square, hunching their shoulders; little crowds of others clung to the doorways in dark bunches. Now and then an umbrella would spring up like a mushroom in that brief gloomy night and then vanish abruptly. Colour and movement began to vanish, too, until nothing seemed to exist but grey and a deep thunderous brown, and there was no movement but that of the rain. A clock above me boomed half past three, like a thing mourning its isolation—then the square was silent.

It was as if all this had happened in preparation for an event—as for the entrance of a principal in a play. I became conscious of colour and movement entering the scene as if by magic. Across the deserted square there advanced slowly a white horse drawing a green trap.

I watched its approach. As it came nearer I saw that the animal's body was already drenched with rain and was steaming and in places yellow. The reins sagged listlessly up to the head, which drooped a fraction, the tail lay plastered wetly against the quarters, and in spite of its colour it looked no less oppressive than the rest of the square into which it had suddenly come. A yard or two away from me it shuddered stormily and became still. At the sight of that drenched wreck, my interest suddenly became of the most apathetic kind.

Then, from that fit of silent gloom I remember being

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wrenched with an abruptness against which I wanted to protest with a cry. And in the sudden emotion of surprise at finding myself confronted with that girl in the trap itself, staring out with solemnity from the great umbrella arching over her, I believe I could have done so without a qualm. As it was I only watched her. In her stillness she was like a little pale image in some dark sanctuary. Only her eyes once or twice travelled quickly over the rainy road, the sky and the clusters of people about the shops, and then returned to a dreamy contemplation of the horse's head. I began a contemplation also—only half-conscious of what I did—against the intensity of which her face remained as immobile as if modelled in alabaster.

Gradually I began to wonder all sorts of things about her—her christian name, why she was alone, how old she was, and as to her secret of the quiet fascination in her still form. Every moment a new army of impressions besieged me. I remember wanting to say something in order to make her look at me. Yet I believe the slightest suggestion of a glance would have aroused me to a point of demonstrative exultation. The foolish part of it was that I couldn't explain even my slightest emotion; my brain seemed capable of nothing but one silent, ridiculous demand: 'Why doesn't she look at me? Why doesn't she look at me?'

I must have cut the most ludicrous figure. Had she by any chance become aware of me she must have burst into uncontrollable laughter. Now I am glad she never once looked at me. I don't believe I could have endured the disturbance of that serene beauty in silence.

Four o'clock struck. I seemed to wake with a shudder and see people crossing the road with upturned faces and palms. I knew the rain must be stopping—but my mind still went on, like the thunder now afar off:

'Why doesn't she look at me? Why doesn't she look at me?'

Above me I saw a yellow slit appear in the sky. I watched

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it break into great blue wounds among the clouds. Around me the shelterers were beginning to pass off, and the thought of being alone on the edge of that shining pavement made me tremble as if I had been on the brink of a precipice. Suddenly the girl in the trap shut her umbrella and shook her slightly wet hair and smiled at the sky. The sight made me pace up and down before the trap in an ecstasy of despair.

By doing so I caught sight of the name in white letters on the side and I began to repeat its monosyllable like a child at a task: 'Dean, Dean, Dean.' I broke into a sweat again. It seemed as if my fingers were burning scars in the covers of my books. As if expecting them both to vanish from me I continued to watch the girl and repeat that name with the pitiful desperation that only youth can summon.

Then suddenly, to end it all, a woman came up and called 'Thomasin' twice to the dreamy girl, then got into the trap and drove away. It was done in a moment. There seemed to be a flash of green and white, like the brief unfurling of a banner, then an emptiness in which I remember standing like a dull regretful fool, with a single thought, 'It's all over. It's all over.'

A glamorous week and a day went past. Staring up at the sky I lay dreaming away the hot Sunday afternoon in the shadow of a wood outside the village. Everywhere was silent. Only now and then the vast green temple behind me would give up the solitary song of some bird shy of the sunlight, or of another breaking out like an escaping prisoner into the bright air above. The may still splashed the hedges, as if with milk. Deceptively close and loud the cuckoos talked monotonously, only deepening the silence of a world that seemed to be sleeping under the benign dominion of the infinitely blue sky.

My thoughts were all of one thing. Sometimes when they reached a pitch of complete hopelessness or delight I turned

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and lay chest downwards to the warm earth. I believe I should have hated even the sun to see my face at those moments. It wasn't that I was ashamed of that incredible passion brought about by an utter stranger, but that I was infinitely jealous about its secret preciousness. And that afternoon something in the spring air itself seemed to be watching me. I didn't feel alone. It was as if a spirit, aroused by some inner cry of my foolishly young heart, had crept out to torment me with all the quiet mysteriousness of its invisible presence.

Then, as I lay there trying to overcome by indifference my strange emotions, I became aware of another presence. A sound of feet, then a rustle of twigs was borne along to me. In a mood of wonderment I lay listening. Then a voice above me called my name.

I turned my astonished face to the glaring sky and blinked at the figure of a girl I saw there. Sitting up I recognised her as a girl named Martha, from the village. Behind her, giggling and nudging each other, were two of her friends, dressed like her, for Sunday. Angry at the intrusion I flung up into her face:

'What do you want?'

Under the fierce reproach in the words she seemed to cower like a shy animal not comprehending a command. Her mouth looked as if about to burst into a torrent of weeping. Instead, she held out to me an envelope and asked in a faint voice:

'Would you give this to Julian Thorley?'

I began to protest. 'But—but why? I shan't see him!'

'It's Sunday. He always comes this way.'

'Is it important?'

One of the others broke in shrilly: 'It's a love letter!'

'Sssh. Oh!'

The girl darted pitiful looks here and there like a guilty child. Gazing up into that sensitive face, scarlet in its

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extreme confusion, I could not refuse its naïve request. A week of the most agonising abandonment to that other face hadn't hardened my heart, and I took the note with a promise. A minute later there was a sound of feet among the undergrowth in the wood, and then the stillness of the hot, serene sky seemed to descend and suffocate me.

My alternate fits of gloom and ecstasy began again. The invisible spirit came out and renewed its dispassionate watch over me. Only now and then the still image of a girl holding a pair of endless reins seemed to rise and briefly annihilate it with its loveliness.

A sound of whistling disturbed me at last. Martha's note, already crumpled from lying beneath me, was taken out and given to Julian Thorley as he passed. He took it with a smile and went on. As he turned the bend of the path and disappeared behind the wood a little shower of white butterflies seemed to fly from him and settle forlornly in the grass.

After that there seems to have been an immense desert of solitude where the mirage of a pale face constantly arose and tantalised me into pursuit of it, and at the end of which I was thirsty and tired as if from sickness of body and mind. I walked home through the dusky wood as if in a dream. My footsteps made echoes that soared swiftly up to the green roof and ran among the leaves like spirits, mocking me.

Suddenly, on turning a bend in the path, I came upon Martha, the girl whose note I had delivered and already forgotten. Her lips lay parted in a sort of questioning smile which seemed to me utterly hopeless and pathetic. Her eyes were never still as she asked:

'Did you see him?'

'Yes. I gave it to him.'

She whispered, 'Thank you.' She looked frightened in the silence which followed her words. Then she broke out:

'Did he read it?'

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'I think so.'

'Did he say anything? What did he say? What did he do?'

Her words seemed to confuse each other in their struggle for supremacy. I remained silent. Suddenly she burst out, womanishly, straight to the point:

'There's something you won't tell me!'

I couldn't answer her. Then a repetition of the words seemed to strike my heart like a blow. I looked once again at that simple piteous face waiting for me to blurt out a piece of information which I felt she hadn't the courage to endure without weeping. But no longer able to bear her repeated cry I told her with abrupt ingenuousness:

'He tore it up.'

She stared wildly. A few broken sounds escaped from her and fled up among the branches. Then there was no sound but that of the languid leaves and a bird or two among them. On her face a few tears glistened and dried. The lips opened in their old expectant way, but her eyes were sombre and dilated, as if she hadn't slept for weeks. I had to ask:

'Doesn't he care about you?'

Her face wore an expression of wonder, then of miserable resignation. Then she whispered slowly:

'They say—in the village they say I haven't a chance against Thomasin Dean.'

In another moment I was conscious of a figure retreating among the trees. Then silence took her place. Until long after I stood gazing at the ground, crushing slowly and earnestly beneath my foot a piece of wood scarlet with ants, as if expecting to gain consolation from that deadly serious task. The sun began to go down as I stood there. A few shadows assembled darkly like a picket ready for patrol. The birds fluttered noisily among the leaves. Suddenly I caught the sweet vanilla scent of may borne in from the hedges on a faint wind. I held up my head and at once all the sensations of all the springs of my life seemed to assail me

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as I breathed that unexpected fragrance. The next moment I saw, soberly and calmly, that for me the significance and magic of a woman's beauty must likewise lie in a single impression of a face beneath an umbrella in the gloom of a storm. It was like a revelation.

I remember throwing up my arms with a faint sigh as I resigned myself to this soothing thought. As I walked slowly from the wood I wasn't conscious of the faintest tremor of sadness or regret. Outside the evening was still and quiet, as if at a prayer. Faint and intoxicating the scent of may followed me over the darkening fields until my head was singing with joy.

Somewhere in the east, deceptively close and loud, a cuckoo called on and on, as if it were noon, and I laughed in return.

THE FATHER

He was a piano-tuner. Snow was falling as he went from house to house, his little blue hands tucked up his sleeves. Already during that morning he had tuned three instruments in rooms where no fires burned, and now through bleak streets he was making his way to another, walking solemnly, staring with screwed-up eyes at the passing hats, letting the snow cover his fat face as it would.

Sometimes, hating the snow, the wet soles of his feet, the cold rooms and the icy keys of the pianos, he longed for night to come. Sometimes something like a lump of frozen stone seemed to lie oppressively across his chest. Now and then drops of moisture shivered in his eyes and on the end of his nose, falling on his moustache and the frayed edges of his black bow.

The knocker of the next house he lifted slowly, as if worn out. It too fell like a stone. In the room where he was admitted there was, as he had expected, no fire, and he remembered that for a long time now he had no money from the people who lived there.

'Ah! well!' he thought simply. 'That'll have to be looked into,' and sighed.

Sitting down, he opened the instrument, and shivering as he touched the keys, began his work.

'Da!—da!—da!—da!—da!—daaaaa!' he tested mournfully.

Suddenly he paused, and then tremblingly from his pocket he produced a newspaper of that morning, spread it out on the keys and read slowly and methodically, his lips moving a little:

'An inquest was yesterday held on Selina Bridges, twenty-seven, professional singer, whose body was taken in a decomposed condition from the Thames near Waterloo Bridge, on Tuesday afternoon. Medical evidence was given to show

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that there were signs of alcohol and neglect. Suicide while of unsound mind.'

The notice became blurred, and as if the printing were to blame he brushed his hand once or twice across the page, but misjudging the distance, he struck a discord on the piano instead. He tried to smile, but suddenly tears began to run over his face. His fat shoulders danced sadly in their grief. Gradually, softly, the snow on his hair began to melt in pure blobs on his temples, and on his legs and boots changed to streams that curled under the piano like dark snakes.

In his misery he noticed nothing. At last the woman of the house put in her head and asked:

'What's the matter, Mr. Bridges? I don't hear you tunin'!'

'I'm only cold. It's all right,' he whispered. He brought a pair of blue hands together in a feeble demonstrative smack.

'You've no business out,' the woman told him.

'That's all right! That's all right,' he croaked. 'That's all——'

He began to cough; his eyes swelled and became an ugly grey. Suddenly he trembled and wept again.

'You ought to have something,' the woman suggested.

While she had gone out his fit of coughing ceased and he fell into a morose state of reflection, shuddering at the thought of the freezing winds, bringing the snow.

'You don't look half well,' said the woman on returning. 'Not half you don't. You've no business out. Here, I've brought a glass of wine.'

He drank some wine.

'I'd be well enough,' he replied. 'I used to be strong. I never had an illness. But it's my daughter, Selina, who's a singer. That's what's the matter.'

He pointed out the notice. As the woman read it he drank more wine and whimpered quietly. Hearing him, the

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woman in consolation sniffed and then whimpered too. They wept together. By and by a change seemed to come over the woman, the cold piano, and the cheerless room, and in the place of the great stone across his chest came something soothing and warm. He felt suddenly that he must pour out a long stream of confidences and woes into her soft, kind face.

'She's my only child,' he whimpered. 'When she was young I used to say she'd be a singer. A prima donna, I fancied. It's nice now to think that I was right. I taught her to read and play—and then after all that——'

'Yes?'

'After all that she went away,' he told her, and then was silent.

Because of the pain of all this he did not speak again but sat rubbing his blue hands together, thinking of his daughter, of the poverty of her death, and lastly of what everyone knew—that once, years ago, he had quarrelled with her and had not seen her since. On his shaky fingers a tear fell and, looking like a bluish pearl, would not roll off. The woman, observing this, left him and fetched a second glass of wine.

As he drank it a soft sensation went through his flesh. He suddenly found it an unimaginable pleasure to do nothing but murmur to the woman between his tears, miserable with a warm comforting misery, softer and easier to bear than the deadly thoughts which had moved leadenly across his brain in the snow.

He murmured: 'My only child. I remember I taught her to play. I always said she'd be a singer. I always said so.'

Now, though he was aware of the poverty and misery of her death, it seemed easy to think of her as successful, artistic and clever, even that she had never despised and left him. In a little while, growing warmer and less conscience-stricken, he turned again to work on the piano, permitting himself occasionally the thin luxury of a scale or two, forgetting the

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snow, the endless list of houses before him, and seeing the death of his daughter as if screened from it by a pleasant rosy cloud. At last he got up, called thanks to the woman of the house and, tucking his hands into his sleeves, stepped into the snow again.

Then gradually as the dreamy sensation of the wine wore off he began to shiver again. The heavy stone dropped back across his chest and bent his ribs inward in great, painful arcs. There were no longer hallucinations and comfortable miseries as in the house. Each piano he tuned grew colder. Between his visits the snow was venomous, and froze him into an aching heap.

He turned into a public-house, ordered whisky, and drinking it very quickly went on.

Now at the houses the people seemed to know of his grief and pitied him.

'Yes, it's my daughter,' he would tell them. 'Selina. She went away to be a singer in London. It's a long time ago. I remember I used to say she'd be a prima donna. It's nice to think that. Yes, it helps.'

And they would shake commiserating heads, give him tender 'Good-mornings' and thanks, yet all the time think: 'That's all right. But he's been drinking again. And they say he used to beat Selina before she left him.'

The snow shot down its white bullets faster than ever. His face began to look no more than a wrinkled blue pea tucked between his hat and shoulders. His feet seemed to die, frozen, beneath him. The desire to drink again was strong.

In the warm bar he became enveloped in reminiscence, and there seemed to come back the soothing air that had shrouded the woman who had been generous with wine. From the bright face of the barmaid seemed to shine kindness. His thoughts were glowing, immense in reach. He felt that he must confide in her too.

THE FATHER

'My daughter S'lina. You knew my daughter S'lina!' he muttered.

She looked sharply up. 'Selina!'

'She used—used to sing. She's a singer.'

'Yes, I know. What's the matter?'

He muttered two words in a low voice, then closed his eyes. The barmaid stretched out her warm, soft hands and put them on his. 'So it's true?' she whispered. 'I'd heard something.'

'Yes, it's true.'

The girl's hand crept upwards and touched his bowed head. 'Don't carry on,' she said. The sound of her voice, the softness of her hands, the warm smell of the room comforted him. It seemed to him suddenly that Selina was no more than a child in a pink cotton dress, standing on his chest and pulling his hair. And his heart was heavy.

'I used to say how beautifully she'd sing,' he said.

Tears ran down his cheeks in a soft, unchecked flow. The heavy misery of his heart made him say: 'I did everything. I made her what she was.'

And though she too knew that he had ill-treated her, quarrelled and parted with her and had not seen her since, and that in misery she had drowned herself at last, the girl went on softly stroking his hair, comforting him. And sometimes, as if in response, tears fell on her hands, sighs would shake his breast, and she would hear him murmur softly, half to himself:

'I used to say how beautifully she'd sing. I had faith in her. I made her what she was.'

TWO CANDLES

IN the early summer and spring it had been well enough: a feeling of satisfaction, of proud satisfaction, had been uppermost in him—that sense which must possess every bird that builds in a lonely tree. The nest and branches are indivisible; the wind that shakes one shakes the other, just as common afflictions bind together human souls.

Now it was autumn—almost winter, when one shut the eyes and bared the cheeks to the wind. Day by day he discovered himself to be more detached, even isolated—no longer part of the landscape which appeared on the verge of complete decay. The woods, the stubble, the soft skies, and the sad-coloured leaves that swam through the heavy air no longer fascinated him. He felt repelled, just as if the house in which he had spent summer and spring had begun suddenly to rot and its roof had dropped and grown mossy. Everywhere he sensed decay. The leaves began to pile up in red stacks which the rain soddened. Naked patches of sky were left among the trees. Only the night before last a leafless branch had begun to tap dryly at his window, a thing he had never noticed happening in summer and spring.

It had been a spring day when he arrived, all alone. A very vivid memory remained: of platoons of green elms, a bright lemon sun, one or two bees, a plum in blossom on the house, a manure heap steaming languidly without smelling, and a bright girl of nineteen or so, the daughter of the gardener, who had held open the gate and said:

‘It’s quite hot, isn’t it, sir?’

That greeting had pleased him. Of the outside it had been true—the sun had shone down warmly. Inside, however, there had been no heat. The monotony of the white walls had been caressingly cool to his face, which the sunny wind had burnished red. He liked the house he had leased. In the bedrooms he had heard the sound of voices, and such was the

TWO CANDLES

quaint arrangement of the building that he had spent some time in trying to discover whence they came. It was puzzling. Downstairs they had been audible. In the corridors, too, yet it had never been quite possible, on that first day, to conjecture correctly whence they came. But of course it had been the girl Mary and her father. All that had been evident on her bringing in tea. He recognised the voice.

That night a flaming heap of cloud had beckoned him out.

Up through the chilly air one or two spirals of smoke had reared, orange in colour where the sun fell. The village had been quiet. In the twilight he had moved warily as if fearful of disturbing that peace and of knocking off the heads of the daisies and early buttercups.

Eventually it had seemed sacrilegious to walk about, and on a patch of short grass he had reclined for more than an hour, dreaming of the house, the plum-blossom in white stars on the wall, the flies, a beetle he had seen, brownish-black, running over the threshold, the girl and her father Reuben, the cool walls, and the future.

An owl had called as he went home. Another responded, and the first became silent. It was like the call of a new life against the old, and the new triumphing. He went upstairs and, finding candles already lit in his room, did some writing till morning.

The girl woke him with three taps on his door and then went away softly. On the curtains of the deep window the sun had already constructed strange, warm shapes that threw reflections on the dark wood floor. But before noon rain had fallen. Reuben nodded sagaciously, as if he had commanded or prophesied and had had satisfaction. His master wrote joyfully.

The evening dripped into night.

'Will you light my candles early, Mary?' he had asked of her.

'Now, sir?'

THIRTY TALES

'Yes, now. Is it likely to rain to-morrow?'

'Not likely, sir,' she had answered, pulling a wick straight with her fingers.

'Your father knows?'

'We all know, sir. Perhaps you'll be able to tell as well, if you stay long enough.'

He had laughed.

'I don't think of going away.'

He afterwards fancied he saw her smile—it may have been so. She preceded him quietly, at any rate, with a candle in each hand. As she drew the curtains she seemed an example of that beauty which springs from some inner force and is no longer merely the beauty of lips, breast, throat, eyes, hair and demeanour. Her movements were expressive of this, and in the yellow light her dark features were one by one and then all filled with it. He could explain her beauty, he found, no more than he could explain that of the sunny or rainy day he had spent in the same house with her. So far he was obsessed only by the wonder and not the significance of it.

'How old are you, Mary?' he asked.

'Nineteen, sir.'

'Yes. Draw the curtains across,' he told her in a distant voice.

He did not hear her leave the room. In gazing pensively at the white writing-paper he saw it become her neck just as the shadow of his own head had become her hair, moving just as solemnly and thoughtfully when the wind disturbed the candle-flames. She was beautiful. He thought of nothing else, and wrote nothing.

As the days passed he felt that beauty strangely. Though once or twice he caught some queer, indefinable glance from her eyes he felt no desire, no excitement about her. Her beauty richened, as if under the influence of the sun. It seemed that her face, growing more golden, heightened the white of her upper breast, while the brow lay firmer under

TWO CANDLES

the luxuriant hair. It became more and more wondrous. Sometimes when she brought in his candles late at night he had a desire to say something simple and beautiful and earnest to her, but of what it was he hadn't the faintest notion except that it must draw from her some equally touching and beautiful reply.

Night after night when she brought in his two candles he had that desire and yet said nothing.

On the finest days of that summer he lay in the orchard, reading and dozing nearly all day. At the far end a white goat was tethered, jerkily munching grass in a series of circles, never escaping from the stake, though the stake mattered little to the animal and was not necessary for its life. And this seemed like himself and Mary. The contemplation, the degree of resignation her beauty had brought him to, was like that rope, and he revolved about her just as continually as the goat about the stake, or as a human mind about a beautiful idea.

Now it was autumn. Under the trees the goat munched not only grass but apples which were half-rotten, and even the leaves under which some were already hidden. The nights were chilly and the days often wet and unpleasant. Sometimes, it was true, the walls grew quite hot in early afternoon, but the sun soon vanished. Mary began to bring his candles at seven, then six. It was all decay—a decay which never fascinated him but on the contrary seemed to infest him, so that more than a fortnight without work had already gone by.

The stagnation and loneliness were becoming unendurable! He must go away again. Progress, life in sharp, warm spasms were as essential to him as sun to a bee. In this climate, with the dead days of winter coming, all that was impossible. All day he stagnated, and what was the result? There was no sleep at night, the branches of the plum-tree tapped insistently at his window, like the call of the old life.

THIRTY TALES

Mary brought up his candles each night a little earlier; but it seemed to him that she too had lost her spiritual and compelling beauty. What remained was physical; he saw her features as mere essentials to the moulding of a material thing. The pervading, fascinating air of the early days seemed to have fallen away like the leaves. She stared at him with big eyes and seemed to move about in a foolish sort of dream, only half-hearing what he said. He fancied her hair had lost its lights, and that the higher neck of her dress destroyed all the noble shape of her breast. He would ask himself, had her beauty been merely accidental, momentary, due to certain lights and summer blood, or was she sad?

But one evening he informed her suddenly: 'I'm going away, to-morrow, I think.'

She stood regarding him.

'I mean for the whole winter. And perhaps longer—I don't know. But it's too much for me here. It's dull. I'm lonely.'

He went on talking of arrangements and packing, and she answered him in quiet monotones which he sometimes did not hear but never asked her to repeat. She had all the appearance of a shadow, possessed with just enough life to wander about the room. She had no gestures. She did not even tap her brow with her hand, when perplexed, as beautiful a thing as the tap of a bird's beak on its own wing. Her face wore a continual expression of wonder, in which there lay uneasiness and uncertainty too. It was as if she was afraid or mistrustful or bewildered. And she no longer had that compelling beauty which had excited in him the desire to tell her some moving, half-ethereal thought.

He was to depart at three o'clock, but unforeseen events delayed him an hour or two. All day a sense of relief possessed him, even though the air was warm and a blind person might have guessed it to be the spring instead of the autumn sun on his face.

TWO CANDLES

Mary had brought up the candles for the last time; he had blown them out only to lie and watch their threads of smoke insinuate themselves into the dark air. Then the tapping of the plum-branch had kept him awake. The slightness of the interference, though it had gone on softly all night, had served to irritate him and wish he were gone.

Now he was going. Mary ran to hold the gate. He had some difficulty in steering the trap through and scarcely noticed her there, but he shouted several loud 'Good-byes' into the air and waved a hand and drove away quickly with Reuben. The sun had gone. Already it was damp with mist under the trees. He felt glad to be gone.

Night came.

With an expression of sadness over her face, Mary walked upstairs slowly, the two candles in her hands. She set them down in his room unlit, and moved across the floor and back again, breathing profoundly.

She sat down, crossed her hands and dropped into a long stream of thought: it reached from the day of his arrival, when she had held open the gate for him, and she also had noticed the plum-blossom and the bees and the heat; all through the summer, the hot, languid hours and capricious scents, his lazy yet essential presence, his conversations—those fragile and precious links with him—the every-night pair of candles, his still warm bed she made in the mornings, certain gestures of his and pet phrases which no doubt meant little or nothing; through all this until he had announced his intention of going and had gone.

She remembered how that to this announcement she had been unable to reply. In her bewilderment she had gazed at him with a transfixed stare—which she had no idea irritated him—as if she had heard him say: 'I'm going to murder you.' Her drawing of the curtains had been mechanical: her retreat also. Afterwards she had leaned all night from her window, not a dozen feet away from him, in her

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grief and amazement gently shaking the plum-bough which ran just beneath her. She had heard it tap-tapping on something softly, every minute until morning, when she had a feeling of utter loneliness as one does on a bare landscape after a night of storm.

All that she had done before; for a number of nights she had sat up, swinging the plum-branch and hearing its soft tap as if on something afar off.

Now she swung it again. As she opened the window one or two gusts of a melancholy autumn breeze sprang in. She breathed quickly once or twice, as if tasting the quality of the air. Then she lit the candles and, setting them in their usual place, leaned out and met the little sharp rushes of air again. Her eyes, as she touched the branch beneath her, had the same wondering stare he had disliked.

Her preoccupation was so intense she did not notice that behind her one candle had blown out, and up into the air was trailing its smoke in a dying thread.

A LOVE STORY

CHRISTINA VERNEY was seventeen when I fell in love with her. She used to live in those days with her parents at a small white dairy shaded by a tall, green sycamore that grew in the churchyard, and we used to go on long walks together to take butter to outlying cottages. She was a small, demure, delicate creature. She reminded one of a primrose, and she was so shy that for a long time I hesitated to tell her what I felt for her.

One warm, blue afternoon in July we took two baskets and walked over a stretch of meadowland and through a wood to a solitary house beyond, where we were to buy cherries for her mother. It was not until we emerged from the wood into the sunshine that we saw the house we had gone to visit, resting among its bright-coloured flowers and beehives like an aged woman on a stick, sleepy and bowed, with the shadows of a grove of cherry trees falling over its yellow walls and its dark red threshold.

The whole world was hot and still. A few frightened blackbirds rose screeching from the cherry trees, red with fruit but unnetted, as Christina ran into the garden, I following slowly with the white baskets, hanging backward a little, wondering who we were going to see.

Christina stood for one moment at the doorway. She was dressed all in pale, shining green, and there was something so fresh and delicate about her that I could not take my eyes away from her. I saw her lean forward, and watched with envy a little white kitten come and caress her feet with its nose.

She spoke to someone and then disappeared, while I waited in the drowsy garden, thinking of her.

Presently she reappeared and called to me:

'Come in! Don't be shy!'

And simultaneously an unknown masculine voice, old and croaking, repeated:

THIRTY TALES

'Yes, come in, young man, come in!'

I entered the house through the low doorway and passed into a tiny room beyond.

There, in one corner, his head resting on a window-ledge set our prettily with pink and white geraniums and a solitary rich blue gloxinia, an old man was sitting. He was dressed simply in brown corduroy trousers and a faded blue shirt, without a jacket. Round his neck was tied a crimson neckerchief. He seemed disabled and did not get up, but contemplated me dreamily for some moments, never moving his massive, simple features. At last he nodded, smiled, held out his hand, and as I shook it, called out in a heavy, guttural voice:

'Mary Ann! Mary Ann! Fanny's girl come for her cherries!'

There was a brief silence, during which I gazed at Christina again.

But suddenly through a door behind her, I saw a woman appear. She came noiselessly, thin, frail, yellow-skinned, dressed all in black, except for a silver brooch at her throat. Her pale melancholy eyes could hardly raise themselves to look at me, and they fell almost instantaneously again to the little lace-bobbin, on which she seemed to be threading beads of turquoise and amber with a silver wire quivering in her long pale fingers.

After a moment she saw Christina.

'Cherries!' she broke out, a little fearfully. 'You've come for the cherries? But not this afternoon? You don't mean to take them away?'

Our coming had excited her, and her voice began to waver:

'We've none gathered. Won't you leave your basket and come again?' she said.

'To-morrow?' we suggested.

'To-morrow's Sunday? Yes, to-morrow.' Sitting down, she gave me a look of relief and tried to go on threading the blue and amber beads again.

A LOVE STORY

As if something were on her mind, however, her fingers grew idle and she kept looking at each of us in turn, and I knew she was aching to speak. At last she managed to whisper:

'It would have been different if Elijah had been here. You see, you should have had them then. You see, Saturday afternoon he'd have been free, and up the trees before you could speak.'

I nodded. Immediately, as if in response to this gesture, she ran into the other room. Before she returned the other figure among the geraniums strained forward and pulled at my sleeve. There was suddenly an air of excitement. In the succeeding moments the old man began relating, rapidly and fitfully, some story which the woman came and interrupted with her small, quavering voice and rendered incoherent. I could only gather that they were talking about their son.

At last the woman brought out a photograph, dusting it zealously with her long sleeve. He had been a shoe-smith, and the portrait depicted him standing by the side of a beautiful black mare. Both man and horse were enormous, handsome creatures. The woman dropped her bobbin in the excitement of pointing out that the strong white arms of the man were as thick as the forelegs of the beast. She began to heap on me documents, certificates, yellow cuttings from newspapers, red and crimson ribbons, medals, and a silver cup, all relating to him.

'They couldn't touch him. He was a masterpiece. But you see that, don't you? They used to carry him home after the championship was over. He always won. No one couldn't touch him.'

The old man, half laughing, half crying, put into my hands another photograph in a heavy gilded frame.

'There he is again. See him? That's him. Cocking there in the front row with all the cavalry officers. He used to

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shoe all their horses. They liked him that much they treated him just like one of themselves.'

And they continued. After a little time, however, I felt their tone change, and presently they spoke of his death. They spoke heavily, with regret, but also as if challenging me to deny that for him death had been something noble and glorious.

He had been kicked one night by a ferocious horse at the camp, and had died without seeing them again.

As they were talking, I became conscious, suddenly, of a shadow over the doorway, and looking up, noticed a figure there. With her face half turned to us, her sturdy arms holding before her a basket of mellow gooseberries, stood a dark-haired girl of twenty-five or six, watching and listening. The grave dreaminess of her face, her unbroken silence, her apathetic pose, arrested me by their air of mystery. The resignation of her small white face, never stirring, never changing its expression of dumb meekness, troubled me. So she stood, for a long time a mere object, like the shadow she cast in the doorway, until she silently vanished without having uttered a word.

Soon after she had disappeared, we rose and departed too. Their last earnest, apologetic words were called after us as we crossed the garden:

'If he'd been here you could have had them, like a shot, you see, while you waited. But you come to-morrow. They'll be ready then!'

We entered the wood, traversing the green, half-sunlit riding in silence. The heaviness of the summer air under the oak trees, and the pure and delicate presence of the girl at my side, made me forget the house we had left behind. The desire to express my admiration and love for her drove away all others.

But presently, speaking in an incredulous tone, she remarked:

A LOVE STORY

'What a fool that son was. A drunkard—drunk night after night. The cavalry officers ruined him. But they'll hear nothing against him. They still believe he was kicked to death by a horse, but everyone knows he drove home drunk and was pitched out and broke his neck.'

And as we talked about him, and of the blind, pitiful faith of the parents, the opportunity to express what I felt for her slipped past again.

We returned to the house on the following afternoon. Again the July sunshine was warm and tranquil: again there lingered the same sense of peacefulness, and the house looked as asleep behind its flowers and cherry trees; once more the old man, his head among the geraniums, sat hunched and staring, and his wife answered his call in the same silent, timid way.

The cherries were ready. Christina put the money into the woman's wrinkled yellow hand. While we were waiting for her to return with the change, the man bent forward and seized my sleeve.

'We forgot to show you this,' he said. He held out a riding-whip. A smile of pleasure came over his face. The whip-lash was twisted about the handle, which was handsomely bound and mounted with silver, and the leather was fresh and dry and the silver brightly polished. The whip had never been used. I took it from him, and simultaneously he broke out, in the same half-proud half-weeping voice as before:

'The officers of the cavalry made him a present of it on his birthday. You see, they treated him like one of themselves.'

The woman returned. And again they poured out for us the story of their son. They repeated it like a catechism, droning, unaltered, with the same gestures, the same photographs, the same ribbons and medals, until it became unendurable to hear this reiteration of sadness and glory.

And then, as I still held the whip, I became conscious once again that the dark-haired girl had appeared in the doorway.

I glanced up at her. She was watching me. The expression

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on her face was gloomy and intense. Its grave dreaminess had gone, her body had lost its apathy, and I saw that her hands were clenched rigidly, with an intensity of angry bitterness which gradually passed over her whole frame, until it possessed her lips and cheeks and rushed into her dark eyes, which she swung rapidly backwards and forwards from my own to the whip, and from the whip to the garrulous lips of the woman and her husband. Once or twice she started. And then gradually the anger consumed her utterly, until she looked as though each word and each memory maddened and sickened her. At last there swept over her face a spasm of impatient fury, as if she thought the repetition of each word maudlin and hollow, as if she longed to snatch the whip from my hands and lash out for ever their blind, foolish faith in him and beat into them at last the truth of his degradation and death.

I gave back the whip into the old man's hands, and she could see it no longer, and when I looked up again her anger was already dying, her hands hung loose against her dress, and gradually, as her anger had done, a strange tranquillity possessed her, and after giving me one indefinable look of stoicism mingled with sadness, as if she were struggling against tears, she slipped away.

Presently I picked up the two baskets of dark cherries, and we said farewell and walked out of the house, across the garden, and so into the wood again.

We were silent. The wood, soundless also, full of a fragrance of trees and of hidden blossoms, stood over us like something watchful, infinite, everlasting.

All at once, attracted by some stir in the oak trees, Christina stopped, tilted back her head and gazed upward.

And I remember how I suddenly set down the cherries in the grass, hastily seized her hands and began to speak to her urgently and tenderly, overcome by a strange fear lest it should be too late.

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

HAVING at last made the decision which had kept her quiet there for the last half-hour, the little schoolmistress rose from the dressing-table, her grey hair shining a faint silver under the candle-light and, leaving the room, went downstairs with the candle in her hand.

At the foot of the stairs, after putting her hand on the door-knob, she blew out the light and entered the room. A whitish coil of smoke danced up before her face. She seemed to wait with resignation for it to evaporate, then, when it had done so, and finding herself staring at the figure of her friend Miss Hallett seated by the fire, became suddenly confused and nervous, and could do no more than whisper when she had intended to speak in her firm, habitual voice.

'We had better begin to get ready, Miss Hallett, hadn't we?' she said.

The other little woman, dressed as neatly but more brightly and stylishly than the schoolmistress herself, let a little smile pass across her less faded lips before replying:

'Yes. We'd better begin. I'm excited already, aren't you?'

Nodding gently, the schoolmistress went and sat down at her side. Twice she prepared to speak but could get nothing to pass her frail little lips. She moved her head jerkily from side to side and then finally, pressing her hand to her temples, burst out:

'Miss Hallett, I've something to say. You know where we're going to-night, of course. It's not often anything happens to us like this. And you know why we're going to the party, too, don't you?'

'It's because the headmaster has been here twenty-five years, isn't it? Think of it—twenty-five years. It doesn't seem possible.'

The schoolmistress lowered her eyes. 'Yes, but it is. I remember it. I was here when he came.'

THIRTY TALES

'You were here?' The other raised her eyebrows. 'Then you've been here twenty-five years too!'

The schoolmistress let a smile pass over her lips also. 'Not twenty-five—nearly thirty,' she whispered.

'Thirty! I didn't know! Then the party ought to be in your honour too! exclaimed the other.

'No, no!' The little lips trembled in protest. 'I was away nearly a year—I was ill. The years aren't consecutive. Then, besides—' she hesitated, her voice dropped a little,—'I was only a girl when I came—only on probation. Mr. Unwin came officially to be schoolmaster—it's quite different.'

She begged the other suddenly, with only half-coherent whispers, with little touches and gestures, and lastly with a smile, to say nothing of this. She desired no honour, she said. Then, with the nervous jerkiness which had been so much part of her since entering the room, she produced a little parcel, which during all that time she had somehow kept hidden, and gave it into the other's hands.

'Open it, open it,' she whispered. 'It's something—something to commemorate our long friendship—only a little thing. But I can't help it.'

The other woman, astonished, unwrapped the parcel slowly. With a rustle the paper fell away from the object within. With wide, very nearly sad eyes the schoolmistress watched this held up to the light, a little comb of tortoiseshell, embellished with silver and studded with a single diamond. It seemed to her like a gleam of deep, uneven gold with another flash, clear and silver, bursting from it. Before the other had time to speak she was whispering again:

'I've had it ever since I came here—ever since I was a girl. I used to wear it then.' Her voice became tremulous, as if with tears. 'Now I'm too old—and you can have it. Yes, you have it. We've been such friends. It will do to remember me by.'

At this point there were tears in her eyes too. Now and

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

then an unusually heavy sigh would drag its way up her breast, where the lace would flutter, and find her lips in a faint and poignant sound. Suddenly Miss Hallett raised her voice.

'Oh, Miss Joyce, what can I do to thank you? It's too good of you. Indeed—I don't know what to say. It's I who should give something to you.'

'It's nothing.' The schoolmistress, as she uttered these words, sought the other's hands, grasped them with unexpected fervour and, still crying a little, rose from her chair and said:

'Now I'm going to dress for the party. Don't say anything—keep it, take care of it.'

So simple, so unpretending, yet so difficult for her to say, these words seemed to reach the other woman as a reproach might have done. In another moment as if unable to bear them, she groped for and seized the schoolmistress's hand and, pressing it against her own, murmured confusedly a long, soft string of thanks and protestations. During all this the comb lay clutched in her hands, imprisoned between their frail, sunken breasts, like some symbol joining or separating them. Suddenly the schoolmistress, as if fearful of breaking down under this, murmured again:

'Let me go and dress now.'

She gently released her hand and, casting back a single glance at the tortoiseshell comb, seized the candle and went upstairs again, upset but happy.

She remembered while dressing how she had feared this scene, how foolish it had sometimes seemed to her, how painful had been even the thought of giving away the comb which she had not worn for so long. Then she remembered how long she had lived with Miss Hallett—she thought it must be nearly twenty years. Sunday after Sunday they had been to church together. Every winter they had taken care of each other. They had chosen their clothes together: she had humoured Miss Hallett in her desire for colour, and Miss

THIRTY TALES

Hallett had looked kindly on her austere and unpretentious fashions. She found it difficult to dress under the weight of these memories and of the memories of her life at the school, where she had taught for so long. Her hands trembled with the hooks and buttons of her stiff silk dress. Even her hair had a look of trembling when she combed it, and the lace at the neck of her dark dress seemed to quiver. When she put on her spectacles the eyes beneath them, in the candle-light, were never still. Her face assumed an expression poised, as it were, between expectancy and regret.

She could see that Miss Hallett was excited too. In the sitting-room, in the passage and the street and finally in the hall where the party was being given in honour of the headmaster, her eyes danced, she could not keep her hands still.

But the schoolmistress's feeling of half-regret, half-expectancy, did not pass. Something, she could not tell what, kept her from smiling even so much as she habitually did. She would touch her spectacles, finger her breast and stammer when people spoke to her. All the timid, nervous creature in her seemed to rise to the surface, as if the party were being given in her honour.

Together she and Miss Hallett shook hands with the schoolmaster. Unable to say the words which she knew she ought to say, she blushed darkly and pressed her hands together. But Miss Hallett remained self-possessed, talking gaily, extending congratulations, resting her eyes for long moments on the schoolmaster's face.

'We were saying it doesn't seem possible—twenty-five years! I should never dream it. We're all so proud of you. We know what such a long service means, what troubles and disappointments.' She went on like this for a long time, then said at last: 'Ssh! Now they are going to begin—they are beckoning you to sit at the head of the table—at the place of honour, you know. You'll have to leave us.'

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

As the schoolmaster walked to the end of the room there was a clapping of hands. He took up his position behind a chair which had been decorated with gold tissue paper and raised a little above the rest. The eyes of the guests followed him deferentially.

Only the schoolmistress was not watching him. All about her, she knew, were the important people of the town and district, the mayor and mayoress, the clergymen, the education authorities and other teachers, the local councillors, the schoolmaster's closest friends. She knew they must notice her standing with her hands hanging motionless at her sides, as if stupid, and with her eyes on Miss Hallett's hair.

Yet she did not care. She even moved her lips in a timid but astonished whisper: 'She is wearing the comb!'

Even after the clapping had ceased and the party had begun, this thought kept repeating itself. For long intervals she could not take her eyes away from Miss Hallett's head. She tried to cover her confusion by eating, by staring at the festoons on the wall, by listening to the babble of voices about her. But her eyes returned constantly to the comb in Miss Hallett's hair, flashing and gleaming there with its glossy gold and brown, its silver edge, and its diamond. She tried again and again to regard this as an hallucination, but always without success. The reality of it forcing itself upon her at last she endeavoured to persuade herself into the belief that she had no longer any interest in it. She had given it away! It was hers no longer! Yet the timid, unassuming creature in her was shocked and hurt. She seemed to see suddenly the meaning of Miss Hallett's excitement, of her assurance, her unfaltering congratulations, of the ease with which she talked to the schoolmaster and looked into his eyes.

She thought of the distress of mind which had taken place in her before she had given up the comb. Every new gleam and flash brought a return of some pang she had suffered while making her decision. She thought of the happiness

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she had felt when Miss Hallett had seized and caressed her head and hands.

The eating came to an end at last. The mayor and some of the most important people stood up and made speeches. The schoolmistress saw and heard them dimly, as if cut off from them by some impenetrable cloud. Now, more often than ever, her eyes came to rest on Miss Hallett. In her hair the comb seemed to send out ever brighter flashes of tortoiseshell and silver. The diamond gleamed like a cold eye. She seemed to float helplessly in a torrent of memories which each of these things began.

Miss Hallett's eyes never left the schoolmaster's face. To the schoolmistress there was something not simply distasteful in this, but something cruel, shocking, and nauseating because cheap and vulgar. She began gradually, as the evening went on, to see in someone else the personification of all those things she had all her life tried to suppress in herself. All Miss Hallett's protracted gazes, all her excitement, her eagerness to be attracted and noticed by every one, the schoolmaster especially, revolted her. She knew she had seen these things, though in a less degree, in Miss Hallett already—in her love of colour and the finer clothes she wore. To-night they were not only more marked but made sharp and insufferable by the existence of the comb in her hair.

She asked herself again and again what she could do. She pondered deeply while watching Miss Hallett moving among the guests, talking gaily with the mayor, the councillors, and lastly with the schoolmaster himself.

It struck her suddenly, as she watched her desperate attempts to seduce a smile from him, as she saw her white hands fluttering about her breast as she flattered him with her long glances, that all this was pathetic. How pathetic and how desperate too! It seemed as if Miss Hallett were breaking down all her dearest and finest reservations and surrendering everything to him, from her finger-tips to the

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS

comb the schoolmistress had given her. And because pathetic as well as cruel and shocking, she felt it defeated her every resolve to remonstrate, to demand, to beseech that it might end.

She moved about slowly, talking listlessly, watching Miss Hallett emerge from one group and another, always with her desperate smiles and gestures, always with the tortoise-shell comb flashing in her hair.

Presently Miss Hallett came across the dazzling floor and spoke quickly:

'The schoolmaster wants to know just how many years you've been at the school,' she said.

Her eyes were alight, as if with some unspoken because too intense delight. The schoolmistress shook her head.

'I don't remember, I don't remember,' she stammered.

'But you must tell him!'

Aware suddenly that she would be forced to say something at this moment, the schoolmistress tried to begin her reproaches, her entreaties.

'You're wearing the comb I gave you—you look so—so——'

She gave up in despair. Miss Hallett smiled quietly at this confusion, and said:

'Yes, I know, I know. But what shall I tell him?'

'Tell him I don't remember—I don't remember. I don't want any honour.'

She felt that she could say nothing else, could utter not the faintest reproach, could not even suggest the horror, the revulsion, the pain and despair which filled her. She brought her hands together and watched Miss Hallett cross the shining floor to where the schoolmaster stood. Suddenly, under the light, the comb flashed its brightest gleam. It covered her suddenly with a feeling of inability to move or speak, a sense of how childish she was, how absurd. Standing quite still she thought of all the years she had spent in the

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school, of how she had worked diligently, conscientiously, hand in hand with the schoolmaster, until she had had all the infants under her care, of how she had saved her money, contributed every year to the pension fund and had earned the respect of everyone.

Now it seemed to her that she had lost this, had lost everything, even the most precious link with her girlhood, even her faith in life itself. Her emotions were so strong she felt she must cry.

'Now I have nothing, I have nothing!' she whispered.

But there was not a sound from her lips. At the far end of the room there was laughter and someone gave out a toast. Expressionless, mute, wondering, she stood there until the wine was brought. Then she took it and responding to the toast, drank it slowly, and standing where she was, her spectacles shining vacantly, her mouth open, as if ready to cry out, she clutched her empty glass in her hands.

THE MOWER

IN the midday heat of a June day a farm-boy was riding down a deserted meadow-lane, straddling a fat white pony. The blossoms of hawthorn had shrivelled to brown on the tall hedges flanking the lane and wild pink and white roses were beginning to open like stars among the thick green leaves. The air was heavy with the scent of early summer, the odour of the dying hawthorn bloom, the perfume of the dog-roses, the breath of ripening grass.

The boy had taken off his jacket and had hooked it over the straw victual-bag hanging from the saddle. There were bottles of beer in the bag and the jacket shaded them from the heat of the sun. The pony moved at walking-pace and the boy rode cautiously, never letting it break into a trot. As though it was necessary to be careful with the beer, he sometimes halted the pony and touched the necks of the bottles with his fingers. The bottle-necks were cool, but the cloth of his jacket was burning against his hand.

He presently steered the pony through a white gate leading from the lane to a meadow beyond. The gate was standing open and he rode the pony straight across the curving swathes of hay which lay drying in the sun. It was a field of seven or eight acres, and a third of the grass had already been mown. The hay was crisp and dry under the pony's feet, and the flowers that had been growing in the grass lay white and shrivelled in the sunshine.

Over on the far side of the field a man was mowing, and a woman was turning the rows of grass with a hay-rake. The figure of the man was nondescript and dark, and the woman was dressed in a white blouse and an old green skirt that had faded to the yellowish colour of the grass the man was mowing. The boy rode the pony towards them. The sunshine blazed down fierce and perpendicular, and there was no shade in the field except for the shadow of an ash

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tree in one corner and a group of willows by a cattle-pond in another.

Everywhere was silent and the soft sound of the pony's feet in the hay and the droning of bees in the flowers among the uncut grass seemed to deepen the silence.

The woman straightened her back and, leaning on her rake, shaded her face with her hand and looked across at the boy as she heard him coming. The man went on mowing, swinging the scythe slowly and methodically, his back towards her.

The woman was dark and good-looking, with a sleek swarthy face and very high, soft red cheek-bones like a gipsy, and a long pigtail of thick black hair which she wore twisted over her head like a snake coiled up asleep. She herself was rather like a snake also, her long body slim and supple, her black eyes liquid and bright. The boy rode up to her and dismounted. She dropped her rake and held the pony's head and ran her fingers up and down its nose while he slipped from the saddle.

'Can he come?' she said.

The boy had not time to answer before the man approached, wiping the sweat from his face and neck with a dirty red handkerchief. His face was broad and thick-lipped and ponderous, his eyes were grey and simple, and the skin of his face and neck and hands was dried and tawny as an Indian's with sun and weather. He was about forty, and he walked, with a slight stoop of his shoulders and a limp of his left leg, very slowly and deliberately.

'See him?' he said to the boy.

'He was up there when I got the beer,' the boy said.

'In The Dragon? What did he say?'

'He said he'd come.'

The woman ceased stroking the pony's nose and looked up.

'He said that yesterday,' she said.

THE MOWER

'Ah! but you can't talk to him. He's got to have his own way,' said the man. 'Was he drunk?' he asked.

'I don't think so,' said the boy. 'He was drunk yesterday.'

The man wiped his neck impatiently and made a sound of disgust and then took out his watch. 'Half the day gone—and a damn' wonder if he comes,' he muttered.

'Oh! if Ponto says he'll come,' said the woman slowly, 'he'll come. He'll come all right.'

'How do you know? He does things just when he thinks he will—and not until.'

'Oh! He'll come if he says he'll come,' she said.

The boy began to lead the pony across the field towards the ash tree. The woman stood aside for him and then kicked her rake on a heap of hay and followed him.

The sun had crossed the zenith. The man went back to his scythe and slipped his whetstone from his pocket and laid it carefully on the mown grass. As he put on his jacket he turned and gazed at the white gate of the field. He could see no one there, and he followed the woman and the boy across the field to the ash tree.

Under the ash tree the boy was tethering the horse in the shade and the woman was unpacking bread and cold potatoes and a meat pie. The boy had finished tethering the horse as the man came up, and he was covering over the bottles of beer with a heap of hay. The sight of the beer reminded the man of something.

'You told him the beer was for him?' he asked.

'He asked me whose it was and I told him what you said,' the boy replied.

'That's all right.'

He began to unfold the sack in which the blade of his scythe had been wrapped. He spread out the sack slowly and carefully on the grass at the foot of the ash trunk and let his squat body sink down upon it heavily. The boy and the woman seated themselves on the grass at his side. He un-

THIRTY TALES

hooked the heavy soldier's knife hanging from his belt, and unclasped it and wiped it on his trousers' knee. The woman sliced the pie. The man took his plateful of pie and bread and potatoes on his knee, and spitting his sucking-pebble from his mouth, began spearing the food with the point of his knife, eating ravenously. When he did not eat with his knife he ate with his fingers, grunting and belching happily. The woman finished serving the pie, and sucking a smear of gravy from her long fingers, began to eat too.

During the eating no one spoke. The three people stared at the half-mown field. The curves of the scythed grass were beginning to whiten in the blazing sunshine. The heat shimmered and danced above the earth in the distance in little waves.

Before long the man wiped his plate with a piece of bread, and swilled down his food with long drinks of cold tea from a blue can. When he had finished drinking, his head lolled back against the ash tree and he closed his eyes. The boy lay flat on his belly, reading a sporting paper while he ate. The air was stifling and warm even under the ash tree, and there was no sound in the noon stillness except the clink of the horse's bit as it pulled off the young green leaves of the hawthorn hedge.

But suddenly the woman sat up a little and the drowsy look on her face began to clear away. A figure of a man had appeared at the white gate and was walking across the field. He walked with kind of a swaggering uncertainty, and now and then he stopped and took up a handful of mown grass and dropped it again. He was carrying a scythe on his shoulder.

She watched him intently as he skirted the standing grass and came towards the ash tree. He halted at last within the shade of the tree and took a long look at the expanse of grass, thick with buttercups and tall bull-daisies, scattered everywhere like a white and yellow mass of stars.

THE MOWER

'By Christ,' he muttered softly.

His voice was jocular and tipsy. The woman stood up.

'What's the matter, Ponto?' she said.

'This all he's cut!'

'That's all.'

'By Christ.'

He laid his scythe on the grass in disgust. He was a tall, thin, black-haired fellow, about thirty, lean and supple as a stoat; his sharp, dark-brown eyes were filled with a roving expression, half dissolute and half cunning; the light in them was sombre with drinking. His soft red lips were full and pouting, and there was something about his face altogether conceited, easy-going and devilish. He had a curious habit of looking at things with one eye half closed in a kind of sleepy wink that was marvellously knowing and attractive. He was wearing a dark slouch hat which he had tilted back from his forehead and which gave him an air of being a little wild but sublimely happy.

Suddenly he grinned at the woman and walked over to where the man lay sleeping. He bent down and put his mouth close to his face.

'Hey, your old hoss's bolted!' he shouted.

The man woke with a start.

'Your old hoss's bolted!'

'What's that? Where did you spring from!'

'Get up, y' old sleepy guts. I wanna get this grass knocked down afore dark.'

The man got to his feet.

'Knock this lot down afore dark?'

'Yes, my old beauty. When I mow I do mow, I do.' He smiled and wagged his head. 'Me and my old dad used to mow twenty-acre fields afore dark—and start with the dew on. Twenty-acre fields. You don't know what mowin' is.'

He began to take off his jacket. He was slightly unsteady on his feet, and the jacket bothered him as he pulled it off and

THIRTY TALES

he swore softly. He was wearing a blue-and-white shirt and a pair of dark moleskin trousers held up by a wide belt of plaited leather thongs. His whetstone rested in a leather socket hanging from the belt. He spat on his hands and slipped the whetstone from the socket and picked up his scythe, and with easy, careless rhythmical swings began to whet the long blade. The woman gazed at the stroke of his arm and listened to the sharp ring of the stone against the blade with a look of unconscious admiration and pleasure on her face. The blade of the scythe was very long, tapering and slender, and it shone like silver in the freckles of sunlight coming through the ash leaves. He ceased sharpening the blade and took a swing at a tuft of bull-daisies. The blade cut the stalks crisply and the white flowers fell evenly together, like a fallen nosegay. His swing was beautiful, and with the scythe in his hand the balance of his body seemed to become perfect and he himself suddenly sober, dignified, and composed.

'Know what my old dad used to say?' he said.

'No.'

'Drink afore you start.'

'Fetch a bottle of beer for Ponto,' said the man to the boy at once. 'I got plenty of beer. The boy went up on the way and fetched it.'

'That's a good job. You can't mow without beer.'

'That's right.'

'My old man used to drink twenty pints a day. God's truth. Twenty pints a day. He was a bloody champion. You can't mow without beer.'

The woman came up with a bottle of beer in her hand. Ponto took it from her mechanically, hardly looking at her. He uncorked the bottle, covered the white froth with his mouth and drank eagerly, the muscles of his neck rippling like those of a horse. He drank all the beer at one draught and threw the empty bottle into the hedge, scaring the pony.

'Whoa! damn you!' he shouted.

THE MOWER

The pony tossed his head and quietened again. Ponto wiped his lips and taking a step or two towards the boy, aimed the point of the scythe jocularly at his backside. The boy ran off and Ponto grinned tipsily at the woman.

'You goin' to turn the rows?' he said.

'Yes,' she said.

He looked her up and down, from the arch of her hips to the clear shape of the breasts in her blouse and the coil of her black pigtail. Her husband was walking across the field to fetch his scythe. She smiled drowsily at Ponto and he smiled in return.

'I thought you'd come,' she said softly.

His smile broadened and he stretched out his hand and let his fingers run down her bare brown throat. She quivered and breathed quickly and laughed softly in return. His eyes rested on her face with mysterious admiration and delight, and he seemed suddenly very pleased about something.

'Good old Anna,' he said softly.

He walked past her and crossed the field to the expanse of unmown grass. He winked solemnly and his fingers ran lightly against her thigh as he passed her.

The woman followed him out into the sunshine and took up her rake and began to turn the rows that had been cut since early morning. When she glanced up again the men were mowing. They seemed to be mowing at the same even, methodical pace, but Ponto was already ahead. He swung his scythe with a long light caressing sweep, smoothly and masterfully, as though his limbs had been born to mow. The grass was shaved off very close to the earth and was laid in a tidy swathe that curved gently behind him like a thick rope. On the backward stroke the grass and the buttercups and the bull-daisies were pressed gently backwards, bent in readiness to meet the forward swing that came through the grass with a soft swishing sound like the sound of indrawn breath.

THIRTY TALES

The boy came and raked in the row next to the woman. Together they turned the rows and the men mowed in silence for a long time. Every time the woman looked up she looked at Ponto. He was always ahead of her husband and he moved with a kind of lusty insistence, as though he were intent on mowing the whole field before darkness fell. Her husband mowed in a stiff, awkward fashion, always limping, and often whetting his scythe. The boy had taken some beer to Ponto, who often stopped to drink. She would catch the flash of the bottle tilted up in the brilliant sunshine, and she would look at him meditatively as though remembering something.

As the afternoon went on, Ponto mowed far ahead of her husband, working across the field towards the pond and the willows. He began at last to mow a narrow space of grass behind the pond. She saw the swing of his bare arms through the branches and then lost them again.

Suddenly he appeared and waved a bottle and shouted something.

'I'll go,' she said to the boy.

She dropped her rake and walked over to the ash tree and found a bottle of beer. The flies were tormenting the horse, and she broke off an ash bough and slipped it in the bridle. The sun seemed hotter than ever as she crossed the field with the beer, and the earth was cracked and dry under her feet. She picked up a stalk of buttercups and swung it against her skirt. The scent of the freshly mown grass was strong and sweet in the sunshine. She carried the beer close by her side, in the shadow.

Ponto was mowing a stretch of grass thirty or forty yards wide behind the pond. The grass was richer and taller than in the rest of the field, and the single swathes he had cut lay as thick as corn.

She sat down on the bank of the pond under a willow until he had finished his bout of mowing. She had come up silently,

THE MOWER

and he was mowing with his back towards her, and it was not until he turned that he knew she was there.

He laid his scythe in the grass and came sidling up to her. His face was drenched in sweat and in his mouth was a stalk of totter-grass and the dark red seeds trembled as he walked. He looked at Anna with a kind of sleepy surprise.

'Good old Anna,' he said.

'You did want beer?' she said.

He smiled and sat down at her side.

She too smiled with a flash of her black eyes. He took the bottle from her hand and put one hand on her knee and caressed it gently. She watched the hand with a smile of strange, devilish, ironical amusement. He put the bottle between his knees and unscrewed the stopper.

'Drink,' he said softly.

She drank and gave him the bottle.

'Haven't seen you for ages,' she murmured.

He shrugged his shoulders and took a long drink. His hand was still on her knee, and as she played idly with the stalk of buttercups, her dark face concealed its rising passion of a look of wonderful preoccupation, as though she had forgotten him completely. He wetted his lips with his tongue and ran his hand swiftly and caressingly from her knees to her waist. Her body was stiff for one moment and then it relaxed and sank backwards into the long grass. She shut her eyes and slipped into his embrace like a snake, her face blissfully happy, her hand still clasping the stalk of buttercups, her whole body trembling.

Presently across the field came the sound of a scythe being sharpened. She whispered something quickly and struggled and Ponto got to his feet. She sat up and buttoned the neck of her blouse. She was flushed and panting, and her eyes rested on Ponto with a soft, almost beseeching look of adoration.

Ponto walked away to his scythe and picked it up and

THIRTY TALES

began mowing again. He mowed smoothly and with a sort of aloof indifference, as though nothing had happened, and she let him mow for five or six paces before she too stood up.

'Ponto,' she whispered.

'Eh?'

'I'll come back,' she said.

She remained for a moment in an attitude of expectancy, but he did not speak or cease the swing of his arms, and very slowly she turned away and went back across the field.

She walked back to where she had left her rake. She picked up the rake and began to turn the swathes of hay again, following the boy. She worked for a long time without looking up. When at last she lifted her head and looked over towards the pond, she saw that Ponto had ceased mowing behind the pond and was cutting the grass in the open field again. He was mowing with the same easy, powerful insistence and with the same beautiful swaggering rhythm of his body, as though he could never grow tired.

They worked steadily on and the sun began to swing round behind the ash tree, and the heat began to lessen and twilight began to fall. While the two men were mowing side by side on the last strip of grass, the woman began to pack the victual-bags and put the saddle on the horse under the ash tree.

She was strapping the girth of the saddle when she heard feet in the grass and a voice said softly:

'Any more beer?'

She turned and saw Ponto. A bottle of beer was left in the bag and she brought it out for him. He began drinking, and while he was drinking she gazed at him with rapt admiration, as though she had been mysteriously attracted out of herself by the sight of his subtle, conceited, devilish face, the memory of his embrace by the pond and the beautiful untiring motion of his arms swinging the scythe throughout the afternoon.

THE MOWER

There was something altogether trustful, foolish and abandoned about her, as though she were sublimely eager to do whatever he asked.

'Think you'll finish?' she said in a whisper.

'Easy.'

He corked the beer and they stood looking at each other. He looked at her with a kind of careless, condescending stare, half smiling. She stood perfectly still, her eyes filled with half-happy, half-frightened submissiveness.

He suddenly wiped the beer from his lips with the back of his hand and put out his arm and caught her waist and tried to kiss her.

'Not now,' she said desperately. 'Not now. He'll see. Afterwards. He'll see.'

He gave a sort of half-pitying smile and shrugged his shoulders and walked away across the field without a word.

'Afterwards,' she called in a whisper.

She went on packing the victual-bags, the expression on her face lost and expectant. The outlines of the field and the figures of the mowers became softer and darker in the twilight. The evening air was warm and heavy with the scent of the hay.

The men ceased mowing at last. The boy had gone home, and the woman led the horse across the field to where the men were waiting. Her husband was tying the sack about the blade of his scythe. She looked at Ponto with a dark, significant flash of her eyes, but he took no notice.

'You'd better finish the beer,' she said.

He took the bottle and drank to the dregs and then hurled the bottle across the field. She tried to catch his eye, but he was already walking away over the field, as though he had never seen her.

She followed him with her husband and the horse. They

THIRTY TALES

came to the gate of the field and Ponto was waiting. A look of anticipation and joy shot up in her eyes.

'Why should I damn' well walk?' said Ponto. 'Eh? Why should I damn' well walk up this lane when I can sit on your old hoss? Lemme get up.'

He laid his scythe in the grass and while the woman held the horse he climbed into the saddle.

'Give us me scythe,' he asked. 'I can carry that. Whoa! mare, damn you!'

She picked up the scythe and gave it to him and he put it over his shoulder. She let her hand touch his knee and fixed her eyes on him with a look of inquiring eagerness, but he suddenly urged the horse forward and began to ride away up the lane.

She followed her husband out of the field. He shut the gate and looked back over the darkening field at the long swathes of hay lying pale yellow in the dusk. He seemed pleased and he called to Ponto:

'I don't know what the Hanover we should ha' done without you, Ponto.'

Ponto waved his rein-hand with sublime conceit.

'That's nothing,' he called back. 'Me and my old dad used to mow forty-acre fields afore dark. God damn it, that's nothing. All in the day's work.'

He seized the rein again and tugged it and the horse broke into a trot, Ponto bumping the saddle and swearing and shouting as he went up the lane.

The woman followed him with her husband. He walked slowly, limping, and now and then she walked on a few paces ahead, as though trying to catch up with the retreating horse. Sometimes the horse would slow down into a walk and she would come almost to within speaking distance of Ponto, but each time the horse would break into a fresh trot and leave her as far behind again. The lane was dusky with twilight and Ponto burst into a song about a girl and a sailor.

THE MOWER

'Hark at him,' said the husband. 'He's a Tartar. He's a Tartar.'

The rollicking voice seemed to echo over the fields with soft, deliberate mocking. The woman did not speak: but as she listened her dark face was filled with the conflicting expression of many emotions, exasperation, perplexity, jealousy, longing, hope, anger.

THE VOYAGE

SHE was one of those very clean, unpretentious and unlovable little boats plying regularly between London and the Dutch coast. Having left the port just after eight o'clock, she had succeeded in reaching the open sea before darkness fell. Her passengers, moving or grouped between the piles of baggage on her decks, had not then begun to think of going below, and conversing among themselves remained gazing ahead through the semi-darkness, wondering secretly what lay before them in the open sea.

The passenger seated at the far end of the stern had not once glanced out into the distance ahead of her, and long before this had wrapped her shawl closely about her head and turned her face to the shore. Under the luminous reflection of the sea's surface and within the darkness of her shawl her face seemed very white against the restlessness of the figures passing and repassing it on the dark deck behind, and in the capricious twinkle of lights ashore it was calm and resigned too.

It did not seem startled at the voice accosting it suddenly but gently from behind with the words:

'I just managed to get the last berth.'

She cried out: 'I didn't know you'd gone! The last?—only one?'

In reply to this there was a faint nod from the man who had advanced in order to lean upon the deck-rail. He coughed weakly before repeating in a whisper that seemed painful to him:

'Yes—only one.'

The face of the woman turned itself upward with a jerk. 'You must cover your chest—you must, you must. I keep telling you.'

'Yes—I will.' A hand, very white and frail too, stole up to his chest and closed the opening then. 'Will that do?' he whispered.

THE VOYAGE

For the first time since he had left her there half an hour before the woman rose. Her voice had grown insistent. 'You mustn't stay up here!' she urged. She followed up these words with a compelling gesture of her hands. Then suddenly her voice became affected with a fresh, unexpected emotion—a tenderness almost girlish in its quivering earnestness.

'You must think!—remember what they said. The night air—so deadly'—her voice nearly lost itself in the tragic difficulties of these last words—'it's so dangerous!'

In the pale luminosity rising from the milky waves about the stern the man's smile seemed doubly faded. It did not seem to be connected with anything. His voice was very detached and feeble, too.

'It can't be helped. Not another bunk in the whole ship,' he whispered.

The woman put her hands up to the throat which had had to struggle even with these words and covered it firmly, as if to instil in the man a sense of their power and unswerving determination.

'You must go down—now, now.' She actually seized his shoulders, as if to put into action this commanding entreaty. 'Not a minute longer!'

'I'm not tired.' He averted his face. 'I swear I'm not,' he repeated vaguely.

From the woman there was a gleam of white teeth, as if of a sudden yet faint anger. It reached him as he prepared to speak again. Against it he became silent, watching the waves which had on their heads flashes of white, illuminating the darkness with similar swiftness. The woman followed his gaze. These gleams of white seemed to her suddenly expressive of mortal enmity, as if having designs on the figure at her side. For the first time there came a note of desperation into her voice.

'I don't like it—go down, my dear—I'll come and see you now and then. I shan't sleep.'

THIRTY TALES

He gave her a single wistful and very timid look of protest, which she dismissed with gentleness. The concern she had put into her words she put also into a little push which sent him a little nearer the companion-way. Half-way there she frustrated an attempt of his to return by whispering determinedly:

‘I shall be angry with you!’

A moment after he had gone she walked to the head of the stairs, cast one look down them and then returned.

Her mouth relapsed into its quiet solemnity immediately. As if by some inherent instinct or some habit borne fatally upon her by circumstances, the woman once again gazed only backward. The lights of the English coast still studded the edge of a cloudy sky. Without hesitation the woman fixed her eyes on them. Such gaze of this nature had not filled them before: it was as if some memory disturbed by reality, of some sharp experience allied with dreams. Beneath it the woman was silent, very still, watching the lights die gradually in the darkness.

They expired gently and almost imperceptibly at last. The woman moved her hands and fell into another kind of resignation without resting from the first. Her expression altered accordingly, allied itself more closely with realities, and seemed to dismiss its former dreams for the sake of a single fresh one. She remembered without visible alarm, but with disarming silence, the expression she had last seen on her husband’s face—its faint smile, its indecision, its boyishness, its look of physical weariness. ‘He was so tired,’ she thought.

Half-wistful, she sat like this for a long time, watching the white, curling lips of the waves, the lights of other ships passing, the dark figures moving aimlessly about the deck on which she sat. The ship bore itself softly out through the darkness. The night advanced softly, too. Now and then she caught the chatter of voices above the rumble of screws

THE VOYAGE

and the noise of the sea. Some people were eating down below. From them also came the voice of a man arguing with the purser.

'But can't I sleep with my wife?' she heard him whine.

'I'm afraid not, sir—not to-night—third-class very full, sir. Single berths.'

She sighed and in the ensuing silence wondered if her husband could be asleep yet. A thought struck her with painful abruptness: 'What if there should have been not even one berth?' Her head became full of fears, of many remembrances of doctor's orders, of warnings, the deadly nature of whose truth had been borne steadily upon her. 'The night air—dangerous!' she thought.

She gave herself up to long reflections, enlarging on these early thoughts with fear, with stoicism, even with wonder. Facing them again and again she ceased gradually to be afraid of them. Then, without warning, some sharp words flashing out suddenly from that past which she had so long dwelt upon, undid all this.

'You had better take him away—quickly—it can't be long.'

She remembered clearly her refusal to believe this, as even now she sometimes refused to believe the existence of the dark sea bearing them steadily outward. This belief had not lasted long, however. Gradually she had seemed to become surrounded by symbols of death itself—his weary gestures, his cough, his hopeful frailty, the way he sometimes shut his eyes for a moment or two and sighed. She had become terrified by them without arousing his suspicions.

Sitting very wide awake on the half-lit deck, deserted except for one or two silent figures, she began to reproach herself: 'Oh! I should have been more careful!' She should never have allowed him to run after the berths, she thought. She should not have proclaimed her fears so loudly at the

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critical moment of his coughing. She should have been more kind, more gentle. Above all, she did not want to make him afraid or acquaint him, even ever so slightly, with those signs of death.

In the morning, she thought, when they disembarked, and began the journey to the place where he was to take 'the cure' she would remedy these things—not a word, not a sign! She would make him smile. With her face still turned towards the ship's wake, she too allowed herself a single smile over the black waters. It vanished a moment later at the distant sound of a cough not far off. She rose, agitated, made her way along the deck and listened.

'Only the steward!'—she managed to sigh with profound relief, trembling a little.

After wrapping her shawl more closely about herself she sat down again, closed her eyes, and passed a long time in reflection. On the dark, sickly face of her husband all these reflections had some bearing. Among others there were memories of their youth together, of their unquenchable ardour and hope for the future of those days. They did not pass over her without each leaving some visible impression—in the darkness her features were vivid, pronounced, ardent, her hands expressive of a great vitality, of a hope still not outworn. Gradually a greyness came into the darkness about her. The summer morning shed its faint pink on the waves at last.

At seven o'clock, without having combed her hair, she ran down to her husband.

He was awake—but he had slept!—really he had slept so soundly!—as if he had been going to sleep for ever—just like that—for ever.

She felt she must cry out, but by some means she only smiled and said:

'We are sailing up the river—look!—the green banks, the cows, the poplars. The sun is shining—I watched it rise.

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They say it's going to be fine—sunny all day long. Get dressed, my darling, we shan't be long!

She drank some coffee while waiting for him to dress. Excited passengers rushed hither and thither. She gave a steward something to get her luggage on deck.

Very frail and careful in manner, her husband emerged at last. The smiles, the enlivening words she had planned while brooding over a sea that had never ceased to be for her the embodiment of a malicious spirit, rose immediately to her lips. 'Look—the churches, the ships, the barges—the sun on the water. Oh! my darling, look!'

Obedying her, he watched the gulls flying to and fro in the sunshine. His health, her previous warning, her fears, were never mentioned. His coughing in that early morning air clinging with double sharpness over the river did not draw from her one reproachful or startled word. She half-closed her eyes in order that, when looking at him, the harsh, painful shadows of his face should be softened and lessened. The strange, too vivid brightness of his eyes she persuaded herself came from the dazzling reflection of the sun on the water, and when they appeared sombre, as if with a dying spark, it was because the shadows of her hat had overlaid them momentarily.

Right to the very edge of the landing stage she continued her delighted cries: 'Look!—the children in the boats!—the streets!—the canals—oh! how lovely it's going to be!'

She held his arm very gently while descending the gangway—she could feel its bone through the feeble flesh and his sleeve. This was another illusion. 'I hold him so strongly—it's no wonder,' she thought.

At the entrance to the Customs drivers and porters besieged her with broken English. She handed her luggage to one of them and gave an address: they would not move on until to-morrow.

Turning her face suddenly to her husband she sought and

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seized one of his hands and pressed it against her side. Her eyes, amazingly young and bright, seemed full of courage, of the determination of her dreams, the fearlessness of her deep resolves. They sparkled with irrepressible fire before she spoke again.

‘We will walk. It’s so beautiful—so sunny.’ She sought desperately to awaken in his pale features the semblance of a smile. ‘We have not far to go.’

LANKO'S WHITE MARE

EVERY morning just after daybreak, Lanko, the quoits man, led out the white mare along with the other horses from the fair and watered her. She was a conspicuous figure, the only white horse in a long line of handsome greys, chestnuts, blacks and piebalds.

On Lanko's head there were white hairs, also, and in spite of his flashing dark eyes he was slow and steady when he walked. He and the mare never went too fast for each other, and he never grew impatient with her, but on the contrary understood her perfectly, trusting her to walk wherever he wished merely by a touch on her side. She in turn knew his touch unmistakably, for he had given it to her with the same unflinching gentleness and care for nearly fifteen years.

One morning, in order to be ready to depart with the rest, Lanko was in haste to return to the fair-ground. He was a little farther behind the other horses than usual. In the fair-ground itself, ever since before dawn, there had been commotion: the rattling of buckets, shrill voices, the jingle of harness, the heavy cough of great engines making their steam. Coming out of the gates, Lanko had had an argument with the 'Fat Lady' man, a trivial and foolish argument, but which nevertheless had aroused a spark of anger in his eyes and had thrown him behind the rest.

For the first time when taking the white mare to drink he felt impatient: in the chilly morning air, with the sounds of departure behind him and the clatter of hoofs in front, the distance to the drinking place seemed immense. He knew that the white mare did not understand this. Her pace did not once quicken, she did not notice the absence of her fellow-creatures. Yet he felt that because she had been understanding and obedient for nearly fifteen years she must understand now.

'We're late!' he told her. He slapped her ribs.

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Her pace did not alter. After a moment Lanko ran a little in front of her and beckoned her, pulling the halter gently. She seemed to recognise his presence, but without responding or increasing her pace even a little. He began to run at her side, slapping her ribs again, as if to encourage her to imitation. But she would not run, or disturb herself, or even turn her head.

Lanko began to grow puzzled. A little more than halfway to the drinking place he saw the rest of the horses begin to return. This was an unprecedented thing: he had been there, day after day, for fifteen years with the rest. Now he would be forced to meet them returning, would have to stand aside while the handsome, many-coloured crowd cantered past. In his mood of half-disappointment, half-consternation, he even desisted from urging the mare onward, and they fell into their habitual pace again, neither one too fast for the other, as if their patient and mutual understanding had suffered no break.

In a moment the long line of blacks and piebalds, roans and browns began to trot past him. He awoke from his mood of disappointment. He drew the white mare to the roadside, holding her there while the rest cantered disdainfully past, the men flaunting their arms, whistling and shouting, demanding what had become of him in a good-natured tirade which he could not understand. It seemed to him an hour before the mass of clattering hoofs filed past: he had not thought before that so many horses could come from the fair.

The last of the men, suddenly distasteful and aggravating to him in their red-and-check shirts, shouted: 'She's only a filly!—make her gallop—you'll never get away!' They turned on the bare backs of their horses and laughed at him.

Their reproaches stung him. With sudden anger he struck the mare's ribs again. It was a blow under which he had

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expected her to leap forward, as if startled by a shot. Instead she moved onward slowly, patient and steady, with habitual faith and obedience. Enraged by this, Lanko ran before and behind her, entreating, urging, beckoning her, pulling her halter, striking her ribs with even heavier blows than before, but without ever inducing her to change her pace. He pulled at her head and glared into her eyes.

Like this he managed to get her to the drinking-pool at last, leading her down to the edge by the halter, pulling down her head until it touched the water. This was his every morning custom, a gesture of tender assistance, as towards a child. The white mare always responded, always drank her fill. But on this morning she only sniffed the water, gazed downward as if at her own reflection in the surface, then lifted her head and turned away.

Lanko was puzzled. The pool was muddy from the feet of the other horses, but he had seen her drink during fifteen years the foulest and most stagnant of waters. She too had suffered hardships. He patted her head in understanding of this. In a moment she would drink, he thought, if only he were patient, if only he waited.

For nearly a minute he was true to this resolve: he stood caressing the silk of her nostrils as he had so often done, humouring her, talking to her, full of patience for her. But she did not drink. All the time her head dropped a little towards the water, as if she were making up her mind, as if she were dreaming. The ripples her feet had made in the surface ran far away, grew faint, and then died—she remained so still.

‘Drink! for God’s sake! Drink, and let’s get away!’

His words were half-command, half-entreaty. But she did not move, though it seemed to him she must understand why he had brought her there, simply because for fifteen years, morning by morning, she had understood and obeyed.

Lanko grew desperate again. ‘Drink!’ He slapped her

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ribs. It was as if she were dead to all feeling—she did not respond, did not even quiver.

‘Drink, damn you, drink!’ he shouted suddenly. He pulled down her head to the water again, wetting her lips. Without even a mouthful she raised it again and turned away.

He led her to another part of the pool and repeated the gesture to which she had never failed to respond, suppressing momentarily all impatience and anger. But there, as before, he drew from her only the response, as it seemed to him, of a stupid and stubborn will.

His anger grew uncontrollable—he wrenched the halter upward and from the bank dragged at the white mare’s head until she followed him. ‘If you won’t drink you must go thirsty, damn you!’

Suddenly he thought: ‘I shall be last. They’ll be harnessed up and gone. I shall be crowded out.’

Again he shouted to the mare, threatening her.

The mare remained still, staring emptily ahead. Lanko turned and looked at her, and then, angered by this long succession of futile words, of unanswered gestures and tendernesses, strode forward and with his uplifted knee, kicked her in the ribs.

There was a pause. Then Lanko, though able to see how startled she was, how deeply she felt the blow, pushed her hind-quarters desperately. To his immense relief she responded and began to move off. But she seemed slower even than usual, heavier in the body; her feet touched the ground uncertainly, her head had drooped a little.

It began to be urged upon Lanko very slowly, in spite of his joy at seeing her move again, that his difficulties with her were not ended. Matters grew worse as he recalled the mornings when she had trotted back from drinking, when the longest journeys in summer had not seemed to tire her.

His anger abated a little and he walked at her side with

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all his old patience, exactly in time with her, patting her side gently in order to remind her of his presence.

Some caravans were already leaving the fair-ground as he arrived there. It was a relief to find that he would not be crowded out: looking at the sky he thought he would be away before the sun was far up.

The white mare stood very still while he fetched her harness. This morning, as always before, he dropped it over her back with practised quickness and ease, with a great jingle of buckles and bells. To his astonishment the white mare started forward as if struck and seemed to shudder under the weight. 'Whoa!' She shivered involuntarily again. His astonishment and impatience increasing, he put on her bridle, but having buckled it, caressed her silky nostrils and spoke to her softly. She seemed to understand. Gently, little by little, he backed her into his little covered cart bearing his pots and pans, his food, and the red-and-white striped awnings and poles of his stall.

They joined the long line of brightly painted caravans and the engines drawing the roundabouts. The white mare was quiet. She moved steadily, as if the shouting and rattle of departure had awoken her against herself. Lanko walked at her side, relieved but silent, chewing a straw. Now and then, when the mare seemed to hesitate and slacken her pace again, he stroked her side, encouraging her. It was autumn, and the red of the trees, the heavy dew sparkling on the dying grass and the frosty smell in the air reminded him how often he and the mare had travelled this way, how she had never failed him, and how always, as on this morning, the jingle of the bells on her bridle had filled him with happiness.

Soon afterwards the sun broke out, shedding a soft, sudden light on that long line gleaming like a multi-coloured snake over the road. It seemed to bring out also not only colour but smell, so that besides the scent of frosty leaves and decay, Lanko suddenly caught all the odours that were

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precious to him—the smell of horses and straw, of cooked herrings, of onions and cabbage, of oil, and the smoke belched out far ahead. It seemed difficult to believe he was not young again, so fresh and strong were these smells, as if coming to him for the first time.

Suddenly he was aroused out of these memories by the white mare. Her bells had ceased jingling. She had become perfectly still.

Lanko caressed her head with one hand and patted her side with the other. He consoled her, as he consoled himself, with the whisper that they had not far to go. She went on again, and with the habit of fifteen years he fell in with her slow, patient and uncomplaining step.

‘Good girl—good girl,’ he said.

The tinkle of her bells was once more a delight to him. His deep, dark-brown eyes shone. In the sunshine the mare’s coat gleamed like silk.

The journey did not seem long to him, but sometimes the mare seemed to lose all courage and would stop again, shivering, staring ahead and breathing hard, so that her sides rose and fell under his hand. Each time by consoling and caressing her he managed to make her go again. Gradually, however, her pauses grew more frequent, her breathing so difficult as to be almost agonising, and her struggles to draw the cart more terrible.

Lanko dropped behind the rest of the line. Now, however, the thought that he would be crowded out at the pitching did not trouble him. He began to see now, even though with intense reluctance, that the mare was not stubborn or stupid or capricious, but ill. He began to reproach himself for having kicked her, even for having struck her. His efforts to atone for this were desperately tender.

‘Good girl, good girl! Ain’t far now, steady! Ain’t far.’

They arrived at last. In the only remaining pitch, in one corner of the ground, he unharnessed the mare. As before

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she stood very still, uncomplaining, until he had finished. Then suddenly, as if only the burden of the harness and the existence of the cart behind her had borne her up since morning, she sank down upon the grass at his feet.

Lanko knelt down too, impelled by astonishment and fear. Her head was still upright, but the nostrils were faintly distended and from the mouth hung a little foam, like the slobbering of a child. The look in her eyes, sick and remote, began, even then, to grow deeper. It drove away very slowly but certainly all the intelligence, all the softness and understanding that had gathered there during all the years of her life. Lanko opened her mouth and touched her tongue. Her mouth seemed to him full of the deathly heat of a fever.

He stared at her for a long moment. She seemed to him to grow no worse. It was not yet afternoon and he began to console himself with the thought that she would be able to rest there all day and all night—even for nearly a week, if need be. 'Good girl, good girl,' he whispered to her.

An inspiration seized him. He fetched water in a bucket and held it to her lips in the profound hope that he had found her remedy. As in the morning, at the pool, however, she would not drink. In desperation he cajoled and pleaded with her: she seemed to him to turn away at last with all the weariness and distaste of a deadly sickness.

Afternoon drew on. The painted poles of the stalls and the tops of the great roundabouts, began to show themselves against the sky. Lanko unpacked his belongings, then let them remain where they had fallen on the grass. He could not think of trade, and, after lighting a fire, boiled up a concoction which it seemed to him, if only he could persuade or force the mare to drink, must ease her before morning. All the time the mare crouched in the grass, the deathly sickness of her eyes growing steadily more terrible.

The faith in the remedy he had spent so long in preparing made Lanko approach her at last with both an entreaty and

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a smile on his lips. 'Good girl—drink—good girl.' He opened her mouth.

When he brought the medicine to her lips they closed suddenly again. He tried to be patient, to be calm. Again he stroked her soft nostrils and put his head against hers. In this way he told her not to be afraid, that he was only nursing her. But her lips would not remain open. Again and again they closed, feverish and clammy with foam, trembling as if both from fear and sickness. Sweat came out on Lanko's brow; he also trembled. 'Good girl, good girl!' he repeated.

Now she seemed to make no conscious effort to withstand him—it was as if the fever had seized and held her mouth closed, until she was rigid and terrified beneath it. She became exhausted quickly, with the result that while she had no power to withstand Lanko she had also none to repulse the tenacity of the sickness.

The medicine grew cold at Lanko's side. For a little while he felt helpless, full only of a dejected wonder that the strong, patient, silky body of the white mare should sink to this. Once again, and now more bitterly, he reproached himself for the blows and the single kick he had given her that morning. 'That might have begun it,' he thought. Suddenly this enraged him, quickened him into life.

He left the mare, and running off, seized the first man he knew. It was the 'Fat Lady' man, the one with whom he had begun the argument so trivial and ridiculous that neither could remember on what subject it had been. Lanko seized him.

'Come and look at my old mare a minute!'

They went and knelt at the mare's side. She seemed to have sickened, even in those few moments, more rapidly and terribly than ever before. 'Look at her, look at her!'

The other spent a long time regarding her. Unable at last to bear this any longer, Lanko said:

'What is it? What do you think it is?'

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Before them the mare grew visibly weaker, breathing with pathetic effort. The 'Fat Lady' man answered in low tones:

'You don't know—it might be anything.'

Lanko began to talk with intense desperation, explaining it all. 'I couldn't get her to drink this morning, not anyhow. Then on the road she kept lagging and stopping.' His voice fell a little. 'After that, just as we got here she fell down and hasn't been up since. She can't get up.'

The 'Fat Lady' man indicated the medicine and said slowly: 'We'll try her with that again—see if that'll do anything.'

Lanko heated the concoction again and brought it to the white mare's lips. He had become more than ever patient, fuller of sympathy and care. 'Open her mouth—gently,' he asked. The 'Fat Lady' man was tender also. Very slowly he forced open the lips which, having no longer the power to hold their own spittle, let it run down his wrists and arms in a pitiful flow. To his attentions there came no resistance, no struggle. Into the mouth held open thus, without strength or spirit, Lanko poured some of the medicine. Along the mare's neck ran a ripple or two; he poured in a little more, making more ripples in her silky flesh, and so on until she had drunk it all. The 'Fat Lady' man let the lips close again. 'Good girl, good girl,' Lanko whispered.

Both men rose to their feet. 'You can't do no more than that,' the 'Fat Lady' man whispered. 'Let her be—keep her still. Put something over her.'

'What is it? What do you think it is?'

'You don't know—it might be anything.'

He went off, and over the mare Lanko laid sacks and a blanket or two. Again he told himself he must be patient and calm—so long as she kept up her head, even though with the sickness staring from her eyes, there was hope.

Dusk began falling; the grass was clothed in mists. In the

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fair itself lights sprang up from the vans; here and there was a paraffin flare.

The flanks of the mare gleamed softly in the dark, motionless, uncomplaining, expressive of her quiet and stoical spirit. To his joy her head did not droop again. At her side he sat and watched, looking at her as if to say: 'Tell me what I can do? Good girl, good girl.'

Out of the surrounding darkness began to come figures. One by one they bent and looked at the mare as she half-lay, half-sat in the grass, and then to Lanko expressed their opinions. He knew them all; he recognised the voices of the men who had jeered good-naturedly at him that morning by the drinking-pool. Their dark, check-shirted, red-shirted, swarthy figures blacked out the light of his fire. He saw the coconut man, the 'Aunt Sallics,' the shooting men, the skittle-board and bagatelle owners, the watch and clock men, little Jews with rings on their fat fingers, the joy-wheel proprietor, the peacock man, his wife with long rings in her ears. The 'Fat Lady' herself came, too. Each of them looked at the white mare, some even touched her, all of them spoke to Lanko kindly, answering his persistent and desperate little inquiries with tact, with bluff, in whatever manner seemed to them best for keeping alive his hope in her ebbing life.

In each of them he found something for which to be thankful. He discovered too that his spirits did not droop, that he had now such faith in the mare as never before. It even seemed to him that so far from drooping, her head had raised itself a little. In the darkness, also, the sickness seemed to have been driven from her eyes.

The men continued their advice, their calm bluff, the sympathies of their understanding yet undeceived minds. 'You can't tell—know better in the morning—might be over in a week or a day.' They spoke with the difficult care of men seeking to conceal a painful truth. Then one by one they wandered off slowly, as if reluctantly, into the darkness.

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Lanko and the white mare were alone again. Her head had drooped, her flanks were steadier, she seemed at rest, he thought. He fell into reminiscences about her—of her early days, when she too had cantered, had borne her head with an arched, beautifully shadowed neck, when he had had to cut her tail in order to keep it from dragging on the ground. In those days he had decorated her not only with bells, but with coloured ribbons and cords and painted banners. She had travelled everywhere with him, in spring-time, in summer and autumn, and in winter had camped with him or had been stabled in some village while he traded. In his mind he could see her anywhere—on the road, in the meadows, at the fairs—with her white reflection in the drinking-pools where they went.

Suddenly he looked up. It was very dark, his fire became momentarily dim, but he saw that her head had fallen. Very slowly he crawled on his hands and knees towards her. He saw that what he had for so long dreaded and hoped against had taken place and was still going on. He could see, even as he came up to her, that her head was lowering in fast, spasmodic jerks, her mane falling across her black eyes, the sickly foam once again dripping from her lips. He leaned forward and took her head in his hands, striving to hold it erect in spite of its heaviness, smoothing back her mane as he might have done a child's hair. He wiped the foam from her lips with the sleeve of his coat. He spoke to her. He exerted his strength in order to keep her head from sinking a fraction. 'Good girl, good girl,' he whispered.

Suddenly she sank beyond his grasp. As if unable to realise the swiftness of it all, he raised her head again and held it in his arms. She was still warm. She raised a murmur. This sound, either of protest or pain, seemed to strike him like something cold, in the centre of his breast. It crept to his heart. Her head sank to the ground. There was silence. He could not even call to her.

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But into her soft silky flanks, still warm for him with the memory of a life recently there, and gleaming in the grass with the rest of her like some appealing ghost, he suddenly buried his face. His lips opened as if to say something, but nothing came, and they closed without a sound.

On the dark grass the white mare lay silent too.

A TINKER'S DONKEY

JONAS PRICKETT, a tinker, came into possession of a donkey. Jonas himself was a squat, dirty, and rather indolent man, not much higher than a gooseberry bush, and with an odd, warted face. He generally wore a bright blue neckerchief, a red cardigan waistcoat, and mouse-coloured trousers. His legs were so thick and bowed that he could not, as they say, have stopped a pig in an entry.

The donkey was undersized also, its legs feeble, its hair worn and mangy. Jonas had accepted it in exchange for money that was owing to him, being too lazy to press for the money, and very much relishing the thought of riding in the little black cart he had trundled for years.

But his wife, a very religious woman, with a drop of Irish blood in her veins, had stared at it on seeing it for the first time. Finally she had remarked with a forcible disgust he did not understand:

‘Merciful God, it’s a she-ass.’

And she called him all those names which cunning wives confer on simple husbands, asking him where he would keep it, what he would do with it, how he would make it pay. He bore all this with the peculiar patience of his kind, and at last they kept the donkey.

That summer was hot and dry. In Jonas’s little paddock the grass withered and died. The donkey, after eating every thistle, dock and dandelion, browsed on briar and hawthorn. Finally, one sultry night, she broke a gap in the hedge, entered a neighbouring field, and wandered and ate and rolled in a crop of vetch, cool, sweet, and blooming, till morning.

‘God Almighty,’ said Jonas, on waking and looking out, ‘she’s trespassing in the field of vetches!’

Hastily he scrambled into his trousers and hurried down. He forgot to lace his boots, and the dew ran into his stockings like water. Every time he came within reach of the ass she

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turned her head a little, brayed, and trotted away. It was eight o'clock before he caught her.

He swore hotly. But it was too late. He had been observed, and though he tried to be cunning and said nothing, two days later he received a paper which looked very arresting in its bright blue.

'What's this?' he asked his wife. 'What shall I do?'

Her knowingness was maddening. 'Oh! it's nothing more than I expected,' she said. 'You've to go to the court on Friday morning. It's all to answer a charge about that mad donkey, and I shouldn't wonder if they put you in jail for it.'

'But I never ate the vetches!'

'Still I shouldn't wonder if they fined you five pound.'

He did not answer. He told himself over and over again how much he hated the idea of courts, policemen, and legal formalities. In all his life he had never been in a police court, and he felt he never quite understood what would take place there. He shrank from thinking of it, and when he harnessed the donkey and drove off on Friday morning he felt weak in his legs and stomach.

It was a fine, sunny morning. Yellow buntings were singing, and there was yellow in the corn.

He drove at his usual leisurely pace, and for once was glad that the donkey would go no faster. Then, at Chelston, where a brook runs over the road, one of his wheels bumped over a stone as big as a beer-jar. There was a brief, sharp crack. Jonas looked over the side and saw the wheel askew.

He had to walk for the next two miles. He cursed a good deal. The wheel performed strange antics, as if part of a circus. At Shetsoe Jonas borrowed a hammer from Sam Houghton, whom he had once beaten at skittles for a quart.

'Knock the top o' the wheel,' said Sam.

Jonas obeyed. But between Shetsoe and Taploe the wheel grew worse, and at Taploe Jonas called on the woman who had given him the donkey and asked her advice.

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She gave him a stone weighing half a hundredweight and said:

'Knock the bottom o' the wheel.'

He glared at her. This seemed like a joke of some kind. However, he picked up the stone and smote. The donkey moved quietly on.

'There!' said the woman in triumph. 'She knows me.'

But the wheel lurched worse than ever. Jonas frequently knocked it with a stone or his boot, but he no longer asked the advice of anyone. Suddenly, a mile and a half away from the court, the wheel broke loose, rolled like a mad thing into the ditch, and brought the donkey to her knees.

In despair Jonas swore and scratched his hair. At last he unharnessed the donkey and extricated her. Contemplating the ruined cart, he felt like a man awaiting the next gesture of misfortune. At last he saw nothing for it but to leave the cart on the grass and take the donkey on.

For half a mile he progressed well. The red and blue roofs of the town appeared, and from the town the strokes of eleven boomed out over the fields.

Jonas caught his breath and, suddenly fearful of the penalties of arriving late at the court, jumped on the donkey's back and trotted her. She trotted beautifully, while he, with his red waistcoat and flapping blue handkerchief, bobbed precariously up and down, looking a little like some burlesque John Gilpin gone astray.

He rode through the streets to the court. Boys jeered at him. Near the court was a waste patch of land with a bush or two, on which he tethered the blowing and quaking ass.

Sweating profusely himself, he went into the court. Ushers began calling his name almost as soon as he arrived there, and not accustomed to the strict decorum, he began to shout when he entered the dock:

'My old cartwheel did a bust, and if it hadn't been for that blessed donkey——'

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'Silence! Silence!' he was commanded. 'Attend to the charge.' The charge, which he did not understand, was read out to him. 'Do you plead guilty or not guilty?' he was asked.

'I always said she was a good donkey and now I know it!' he shouted.

'Silence! Answer the charge!'

'God's truth, how could I help it? I was abed and asleep when she went and did it.'

'Order! Order! You must answer the charge!'

'What could I do? There she was in the field of vetches when I woke——'

'Guilty or not guilty?' the superintendent thundered.

'If she was in the vetches she was in the vetches and what could I do? Not guilty!'

The Court tittered: the superintendent read out the facts: witnesses were called; and, finally, the magistrates conferred.

All the time Jonas had to be prevented from saying such things as 'She was there when I woke! If she was there she was there, and what could I do?' Finally he did succeed in shouting loudly: 'She might have had the vetches, but when my old cart bust itself she brought me in, didn't she? I rode her in. Ain't that good enough?'

'Order! Order!' he was commanded again. 'You will be fined twenty shillings or ten days in default.'

'But God's truth,' he protested desperately, 'if it hadn't been for her I should never have been here at all! I couldn't have done it!'

And as he waddled up to pay his twenty shillings he could not understand why the Court was laughing at him, for as he stood there thinking of his donkey, his broken cart, and his wife, it seemed to him an altogether serious thing.

A THRESHING DAY FOR ESTHER

THE threshing engine stood between the cow barns and five stacks of wheat and barley, belching up clouds of black smoke into the tall poplar trees oversteeping the pond. The storm was spending itself furiously, driving dark flocks of clouds low over the farm, spitting cold gusts of rain and yellowing the air with showers of poplar leaves. The stacks were ruffled like birds, and straws in thousands sailed upwards in tufts like golden feathers and were borne away into the distance with a pale mist of chaff from the drum and the black smoke writhing and sweeping over the fields in sombre coils. The air was full of the sound of sighing trees and a never-interrupted roar and stuttering from the engine and a moaning crescendo in the threshing-drum as the knives closed over the sheaves. Black and white hens were feeding everywhere in fluttering crowds. Except for a group of women standing under a wagon-shed, idly gossiping and occasionally tying the sacks as they came from the drum, everybody seemed industrious and excited. The skirts of the women danced and flapped in the high wind like flags, and their voices were drowned in the everlasting roar of the threshing and the storm.

Esther was standing in the wheat stack next to the drum. She was dressed in an old blue woollen frock that was too tight in the bodice for her. Brown and slender, with long, slim legs and arms, and firm, pointed breasts that seemed to be trying to push themselves through her dress, she was like a branch of willow. She was not more than fifteen. Her hair and eyes were dark, and the eyes had a passionate flickering of light in them like that of burning oil. Some neighbours had come to help her father thresh, and she was not wanted on the stack, but she had been standing there since breakfast, although hardly able to keep her feet in the wind, trying to

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help in throwing up the sheaves to the drum. Her movements were awkward and clumsy. Sometimes she hindered the men; sometimes she was not strong enough to lift the sheaves. Now and then she would lean on her pitchfork and lapse into a sort of watchful oblivion, gazing intently at the men as if fascinated by their dark figures, their feats of strength and their irresistible, indefinable masculinity. Her eyes at these moments would fill with a brooding solemnity, as though she were full of dreams.

The women sacking up the corn under the wagon-shed did not interest her. Soon, however, she noticed a commotion among them; they had ceased talking and were craning their necks and gazing in one direction.

A moment later there was a fluttering of expectation, and suddenly there dashed into the yard a white horse drawing a smart green cart driven by a tall dark man dressed in a black coat, yellow breeches and gaiters. He drove standing up, hammering the horse's quarters with an ash stick, jolting up and down with exaggeration. His black head was thrown back and his white neckerchief was flying wildly in the wind behind.

The women, with their hands nozzling the sacks and with pieces of string in their mouths, were staring up at him.

The man flung the reins over the horse's back. There was mud on the horse, and its jaws were yellow with foam. The man whistled, and from under the cart seat a grey whippet wormed itself out and sat upright.

'It's Pike!' someone shouted.

The men began to put up their hands, greeting him. He was evidently very popular. He turned and grinned, and then shot his hand like lightning into his loose coat and whisked out a rabbit.

'What price the dinner?' he shouted.

The threshers began laughing. The whippet put its nose to the rabbit's red snout and whimpered.

A THRESHING DAY FOR ESTHER

'Get down, you bitch!'

He held the rabbit higher.

'That's a lovely rabbit, that is, Pike, my duck,' called a woman. 'If you were a gen'leman, Pike, you'd give me that!'

'Who said that?' said Pike, wheeling about sharply. 'Who said it?'

'I said it!' A little perky-faced woman tying a sack thrust her face up to him with a haughty smile. 'Go on, give us that rabbit, Pike, be a gen'leman!'

'Give it you! Strike me! I'll give you something you don't ask for, and quick too!' He smiled cunningly.

The women sniggered and tittered among themselves. The whippet made a snap at the rabbit, but the man dealt her a blow on the nose and sent her cowering.

'How'd you happen on that, Pike?' shouted a thresher.

'How'd I happen on it? What's the dog for?'

'Lucky devil! I warrant you'd lose a farthing and find a sovereign any day.'

The man remained for a moment or two longer in the cart, laughing and bantering and displaying the rabbit which the dog had caught. There was something handsome and remarkable about his dark face, swarthy as a gipsy's, with its soft black eyes and humorous, sardonic mouth, and something arresting in the good-natured sharpness of his manner and the glib words flowing from his lips as smoothly as oil. He jumped loosely down from the cart, and still carrying the rabbit, with the whippet sniffing behind, led his horse away, walking with a half graceful swagger of his hips, like a woman. There was a sort of careless assurance about him, and a proud, compelling indifference that kept the women staring after him until he had disappeared.

The girl also watched him intently, her dark eyes full of a solemn curiosity. There was a tender half-smile on her lips, as if merely to have set eyes upon him had given her a thrill of expectation and pleasure. And suddenly she no longer

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wanted to remain on the dwindling stack and watch the drum pouring out the grain, the men forking the sheaves, and the straw-jack everlastingly creeping up with the straw.

She slid off the stack, and going to the corner of the stables, watched him put up his horse. He was between thirty and forty. The strange impression of his careless personality renewed itself as she watched him unharness the horse. Full of vague and indefinable longings, she started and trembled whenever she felt he glanced at her.

'There's a rat! Pike! Where are you? You're missing the sport!' someone shouted.

Threshers were standing in readiness about the stack with sticks and pitchforks, waiting for rats and mice to appear. At the sound of the voice the girl turned her head. Suddenly Pike ran past her, brandishing a long hawthorn root as thick as a horse's leg. He reached the drum as someone shouted, and a young rat darted away from cover. He turned instantly and swung his arm and struck one blow with the hawthorn root, and the rat lay red and still.

He kicked it into a heap of straw and a smear of blood marked the wet ground, and he walked on. He walked with a sort of prowl, swaying to and fro, watching eagerly.

Someone had killed a rat, too, on the far side of the stack and was holding it up by the tail. Pike waved his stick and shouted, and suddenly a drove of mice came scurrying towards him, scattering and squeaking like chickens in terror. He swung the root and brought it down like a flail, killing two or three mice at every blow. A mouse escaped and darted in and out of the straw towards the wagon-shed, the women perching on sacks, screaming and laughing and shouting for Pike to kill it. He followed it like a dog and scattered blows until he beat it to death as it fled to open ground. He laughed and picked up the carcase and flung it like a tangle of crimson wool into the midst of the women. They shrieked and fled, telling him only to wait until all was over and they could lay

A THRESHING DAY FOR ESTHER

hands on him, but he merely waved his hand and smiled with shining eyes and jauntily went on.

The threshers clustered themselves about the last sheaves. Pike waited apart. Esther was able to watch him clearly, to feast on the extraordinary intentness of his black eyes and to feel the strange impression of his personality as he stood close to her.

She was startled by sudden cries from the threshers and screams from the women, and by rats of all sizes running in all directions. A rat as big as a leveret came scuttling straight for her and she shut her eyes and shrieked 'Pike! Pike!' in terror. The unexpected utterance of his name filled her with shyness and consternation, leaving her faint and crimson as if the rat had really come for her. Opening her eyes she saw it lying dead a little distance away and Pike himself already slashing with the hawthorn root among a litter of young. Empty of sheaves, the threshing drum came to a stop with a long moan. In the silences she was able to hear the squeaking of mice and someone called her name, asking her to come and see a nest of little ones, still blind, lying under a heap of black husks where the stack had been.

She crossed the stack-yard. Rats were lying everywhere, and every now and then another would scamper forth and run blindly away until Pike or another thresher brought the stick to its head.

She walked among the deserted rat holes and peered at the nest of young. The tiny mouse her father tucked into her hand seemed softer than a ball of velvet and she was not afraid.

As she squatted there, holding and stroking it, feeling the wind blow out her dress and hair, she became conscious of Pike standing close to her.

The sun came out, and the hawthorn root blazed crimson where he had thrown it on the straw. In the strange silence she heard him boasting of the rats he had killed, and she knew he was wiping the sweat from his face. She dared not look

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at him: his achievement seemed horrible and wonderful, and her heart drummed against her breast as if in fear.

She heard him move away with the men. She stroked the mouse quickly with her finger-tips and gazed on at the nest of tiny squeaking things until she heard the drum being moved. Then she dropped the mouse and went hastily to where Pike was standing, unable to let him out of her sight again.

When they began to thresh the second stack, Pike threw off his jacket and took the place of Jasper Bird on the drum. Esther went to stand by the wagon-shed, by the women, in order to see him better. The women were talking about him.

'Don't he have all the luck!' one was saying. 'Look at that rabbit. That fair dropped into his lap, didn't it? He just whistles for whatever he fancies and it comes, and he takes no more notice, the lucky dog.'

'And see how he killed them rats, just as if they walked up and let themselves be killed, easy as easy. Ah! he's a Tartar.'

They began whispering together. 'If you'll believe me, he got hold of my arms last threshing day and pressed me back against the straw-stack until I couldn't get my breath. I thought my ribs would crack. And then when he knew I couldn't keep him off any longer, he started tickling me and I fell on the straw.'

A fiercer gust of wind raised a storm of chaff, and the women buried their heads in their aprons.

Esther moved away and sat on a pile of pine-wood and gazed at him again. The clouds were scattering, and there were intervals of sunshine, very pale and restful. Gazing up at his dark figure outlined against the sky, she could see the silvery flash of his knife as he cut the bands and threw the sheaves to the drum. Her eyes were still full of the same grave and meditative watchfulness and she kept them fixed on Pike as if afraid that he would fall.

A THRESHING DAY FOR ESTHER

II

Pike was sitting on an empty oil-barrel under the wagon-shed, drumming softly with his feet and whistling some bars of a comic song. His dinner was spread out on a white cloth over his knees, a piece of fat pork and a square of batter-pudding and a handful of purple cabbage wrapped in a sheet of paper. He was holding a large white loaf in one hand and was busy wiping his knife on his sleeve with the other. The threshing engine was silent except for a sound of escaping steam. Threshers and women were sitting about on sacks and boxes, talking and eating. Pike's whippet was lying under a corn-drill, pawing and worrying a dead rat. Jasper Bird and his wife and an old man with white hair and trembling lips and ancient blue eyes were seated in absolute silence on some sheaves piled up against a wagon-wheel under the wind, a little apart.

'Yes, I've been in service.' Pike cut off some pork and dipped his bread in the cabbage juice as he spoke. 'And in service to a lady as well. I know all about putting ladies to bed and getting them up in the morning, I tell you.'

'Oh! get along with you,' said a woman. 'You've never been near a woman's bed in your life.'

Pike emptied his mouth of pork and bread and screwed up one eye.

'When I was in service to the Honourable Mrs. Alexander Timothy, let me tell you, we used to put the old gal to bed six nights out of seven, if you'd like to know. Drunk as a lord! With enough whisky in her to drown the children of Israel! And God knows what else besides; what with sherry for dinner and brandy with the coffee and a little something else to play with at the bottom of the glass in the firelight before ever she thought of whisky. And perhaps you don't know what she paid for that bloody whisky? Whisky, mind you, not pig-swill. Never less than a quid a

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bottle. She'd think nothing of swigging a poor man's wages before eleven o'clock at night. And when she'd had enough she'd roll on the tiger-skin and pull her hair out with her teeth and wake the house up. And then the butler used to call me and we'd go in the drawing-room. He was an old fool. He used to look as soft as butter, rubbing his hands and bowing and asking her if she'd like "to retire." Retire! Christ! Either she'd be snoring already or she'd be raving the roof down. Retire! I used to say to him, "Snatch hold of her legs quick, and go quietly." Fat old owl! Her bosom alone must have weighed as much as that sack of barley.'

He filled his mouth with bread and cabbage and gulped, shutting his eyes.

'Well, lucky enough the stairs in that house were as wide as a forty-foot lane, and somehow we used to drag her to bed.' His voice grew soft. 'The bed she slept in was as big as that wagon where Jasper's sitting. I often think about that bed. It had long pink velvet curtains and smelt of violets and night-scented stock or something, and the counterpane was every inch lace with an underneath part of red silk. Well, when we'd slung the old boozier in like a dead sheep, she'd begin to groan and say she was dying. The butler would get frightened and sweat like a bull and order me to run and get the maids to undress her. But you know if there's one thing a woman hates, it is another woman drunk. A woman'll put a man between the sheets as easy as winking, but she'd as lief draw twenty hens, stink as much as they might, as put a woman. And every jack maid in that house used to lock her door as soon as it went round that the old woman was drunk. And they wouldn't stir! You might knock at their doors for everlasting and they wouldn't stir.'

He filled his mouth with pork and gnawed at his bread. His dark eyes were bright and handsome, and there was something magnetic and strange about his soft speech and

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about all he said. He drummed his heels softly in the barrel and went on, eating and speaking alternately.

'I could get the maids to do almost anything, I tell you,' he said, 'but not that. And at last the old butler used to come running out with his shoes off and call me back. The room used to stink like a bar when I went in. Filthy! There's no one knows how the aristocracy live only those as sees it. Wickedness! Pah!'—he paused and spat out a piece of gristle with a sound of disgust—'pah!—we used to put her to bed. It took the two of us to roll her over on her chest, then I used to unhook her dress while the butler took care of her jewels. God! the jewellery on that old cow! Emeralds and diamonds and things you read about in the Bible hung round her bosom and neck as thick as peas in a pod! And wasted! Every bit of it wasted. Not a soul, only the servants, to look at her, the ugly old sinner, and sunk as low as driving out in her carriage looking for any man with nothing else to do.'

He paused, and a thresher looked slowly up and said:

'Pike, my son, that only shows what breeding can do.'

'Breeding! Let me go on breeding pigs if that's breeding.'

Everyone, even Jasper and Clara Bird and the old man by the wagon, began laughing. And Pike went on in a softer voice:

'Sometimes it took us an hour to get that old geyser to bed. She'd rave and struggle and sometimes she'd be sick—yes, all on that beautiful counterpane. I used to hold her down while the butler dragged her dress off. It used to be easy enough till we got to her stays. I gamble you've never seen stays like that old woman's! They were like a ship-hurdle on her, buckled and laced and pinned and hooked so that the fat came out at her neck like rolls of suet. And underneath silk enough to make your heart ache. You'd die to see that silk, you women would. Well, there it is: we all know a woman like that ought to live in a pigsty and wear sacks, and I often used to wish she did, but what could I do?'

'Only put her to bed?'

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'That's it. Only put her to bed in her petticoats, and hope to God she wouldn't be at it again before you had the silver cleaned in the morning.'

'God knows what folks like that are fit for.'

'Yes, and I doubt if He knows justly.'

Pike finished his dinner and stretched his legs. 'Yes, she was a wicked, dirty old swine. God bless her though,' he said. 'She left me twenty pounds and a pair of pictures, though I'd sooner have had the bed than anything.'

He rose and walked from under the wagon-shed and whistled his dog. He turned his eyes upward and stood for a moment erect and immobile, gazing at the clouds, his whole being full of an unconscious and careless grace, like a lazy animal's.

Esther, who had not once stirred while he was speaking, followed all his movements with soft, attentive eyes. She was sitting on a heap of straw, and her limbs were cramped, and she would have liked to follow him, but she sat as if hypnotised and did not stir.

'Have a wet with me, Pike?' called a thresher, holding up a bottle.

Pike waved his hand and shook his head and sauntered away with his dog.

It was quite silent when he had gone. The intense atmosphere of listening vanished. Jasper and two of the threshers dozed off to sleep, one with his chin on his chest and his long red tongue lolling out. Little whirlwinds of chaff flew round and round. The girl herself sat in a kind of dream, in a thrill of meditation, giving herself up wholly to the memory of his lively, handsome face, his faintly mysterious personality and his romantic words.

Suddenly, when some time had passed, the silence was broken by the loud report of a gunshot. The sleepers opened their eyes and sat up in fright, one of the threshers so violently that he bit his tongue.

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Dead silence fell. At length one of the women slid off her sack and whispered:

'Pike, I'll gamble.'

They waited.

And presently there were footsteps, and Pike appeared, sauntering lazily along, the dog still at his heels, as if nothing had happened.

'You hear a shot, Pike?' said a thresher.

'I heard something.'

'See any shooters?'

'No, I didn't see any shooters.'

He began whistling softly, and very deftly slid a cock-pheasant feather down his sleeve and began brushing it with his fingers.

'Pretty feather,' said a woman.

'Ah!' Pike said indifferently, twisting it like a shuttle.

'And it's come from some pretty bird? I guess it did.'

'You're clever, ain't you?'

'Oh! out with it. The luck fair drops into your lap from heaven. A bird would sit on a mole-hill and stare at you while you shot it.'

'Perhaps it would. Yes, perhaps it would.'

He threw away the feather with a smile. Then the threshing began, everyone talked of his amazing luck and of the pheasant he had shot while no one was looking, and the girl sat aside on the heap of pine-wood, in the sunshine, alternately rubbing the feather across her cheek and letting the light play on its colours, dazzled by its loveliness.

III

Evening came on and Esther put the last mushroom, a little silky white button, into her basket with the rest, and hurried through the dewy grass of the paddock in the direction of the farm and the setting sun. The wind had dropped, and the engine had suddenly ceased and the air was silent. The sky

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was cold and clear as glass except for a flush of lemon and green above the sunset.

Her heart beat faster when she looked at the mushrooms and she was afraid of being seen in the paddock. Coming to the gate by the stack-yard she saw the Birds drive off, and heard the engineers shouting as they coupled up the jack and the drum ready to go away, and her heart sank in fear.

The heavy scent of newly threshed corn and smoke and the dampness of evening filled the farmyard. It was already shadowy in the wagon-shed and between the stacks of straw. As she passed the engine, encountering its sudden warmth and looking in all directions for Pike's white horse, she saw her mother watching from the kitchen door and hid herself quickly in the shed, afraid of being seen.

After standing there a little, her heart pounding in her throat, she caught sight of the horse. It was already harnessed to the cart, and it was waiting by a stack of barley straw, in the farthest corner of the yard. She could hear the tinkle of its bit as it champed the straw.

She skirted the stacks and stood tensely still by Pike's horse and waited: and gradually she heard the rattle of couplings and the heavy grinding of wheels and knew that the engine was departing; she heard many voices, and among them, for the first time since returning, the voice of Pike himself, and the sound of it filled her with an ecstasy of joy and apprehension that was like a sickness. Why was she there, she began to ask herself. What would she do when he came? Hadn't she better run away and give the mushrooms to her mother before he had time to come? What would he do when he found her there?

But she did not move, and presently by the louder clanging of wheels and the receding voices and the black smoke floating away over the darkening fields she knew that the engine was leaving the yard. The sounds grew fainter. A woman ran past, waving something above her head, shouting:

A THRESHING DAY FOR ESTHER

'You old fool, left your waistcoat again! You'll leave yourself next!'

Her voice faded, too. The yard became silent except for the hens scratching among the straw and Pike's horse nodding its head. She looked into the cart and saw the gleam of a gun-barrel, and the rabbit and the pheasant lying side by side there in a pool of blood. The clouds above the sunset were turning purple and red, and one of the darker clouds loomed up and resolved itself into a flock of starlings that flew over with a whisper of beating wings.

She heard a whistle and saw the horse prick up his ears, and she longed desperately for one second to be swallowed up in shadow, but a moment later Pike was there, standing before her.

It seemed to her that he looked darker and taller in the twilight, and all at once her thoughts and her will subjected themselves to him. The sound of his voice murmuring in astonishment 'Esther!' seemed to her full of an unbelievable tenderness, and she forgot all that she was to have said to him and stood instead in an attitude of solemn adoration, gazing shyly at him with her head thrown back against the straw. A sensation of sublime happiness overcame her merely because he returned this stare, and she felt herself trembling, the desire to explain everything at the same moment vanishing. She told herself that he divined the meaning of her presence there, and the thought passed swiftly through her mind and made her smile.

He returned her smile, too, and came a step nearer and stood so that he was gazing down at her. Slowly the sensuous, smiling, almost ironical expression in his black eyes began to bewilder her. She saw him raise his arms, and felt him seize her own with a gentle eagerness that flooded her with a tumultuous happiness followed by weakness and terror. She tried to lift her arms and push away the dark face bearing slowly down on her, but she felt the pressure on her arms increase, and something began slowly to crush her breast

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until she closed her eyes. Quickly and impassionately, pressing her head relentlessly farther and farther back against the straw, Pike began to kiss her, kissing her as if he would never release her, until the very life in her seemed to surge up and career away from his touch in a dark flood, leaving her faint and drunken.

Gradually, after a long time, she felt herself being released, and the pain of being suddenly severed from him, followed by the long, exquisite kiss, seemed to stun her, and she felt her eyes filling with tears.

She felt ashamed of her tears, and did not know how to face him. She turned and pressed her face against the stack, struggling against her sobs as she struggled against the kiss, weak but happy, feeling as if her soul had been frightened and bruised, but transported by some emotion at once too powerful and exquisite for her to comprehend.

'What is it!' said Pike. 'Don't you like being kissed?'

The half-soft, half-ironical words burned in her mind long after she had heard the last flick of the whip, the horse's feet rustling through the straw and the sound of wheels retreating farther and farther away.

She lay down and thrust her face into the straw. The sky grew darker, and a flock of starlings flying overhead with a low whirr of wings could hardly be seen. It comforted her to breathe the sweet scent of the straw. A mouse that had escaped came out in the silence and rustled away, and listening to it her thoughts went back to the early morning, the rats, the story Pike had told under the shed, the pheasant he had shot, and at last the kiss he had given her. The memory of these things filled her soul suddenly with a flood of miraculous, sublime happiness difficult to bear. She gave a long sigh and slowly the grief on her face faded, and raising her head, she fixed her eyes on the dark sky, already pointed with stars, and smiled.

No sooner had she begun to smile, however, than it seemed as if her heart would break.

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